

# Winninotti



A NOVEL

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**ILLCONTINUUM  
MUUNITNOCLI**



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Urban exploration, especially under the condition of imminent demolition, is trespassing under United States law and a dangerous activity of which neither this book nor its author endorse. They do, however, think it is cool.

*“The book will kill the edifice.” – Victor Hugo*

*“The dog days are over.” – Florence Welch*









Ouch. Rippling waves of hot pain ran through his hip. Ice water soaked his boxers and flashfroze his cheap jeans to PVC pipe. Nearly as soon as he embarked from the cozy dry indoors to the frozen, unguaranteed outside, he slipped. A keyring resituated uncomfortably between his pocket and the ground. The beginnings of a scrape seethed under wet clothes. Did anyone see? See him go head over teakettle, or however that's supposed to go, and did they notice him try and mitigate the fall mid-fall by throwing out his ass like a toddler learning to walk? He knows someone did.

He'd come outside to wait for his dad's car. It was six miles back home, which on a warmer day he would gladly walk. Six miles is the wildspace of walking distance. Out of the question for anyone with a car, which he did not and would not for another few years. But everything's within walking distance so long as the kid may be bored enough; even three days removed from a snow day, when the leftover slush conglomerated like oatmeal and the stomped fluff condensed to unkind, pantswetting ice. But his dad insisted, and so he paced the east entrance in long, gentle ovals. Even though his calves were sore. Even though walking was all he had done for two hours. Like a zoo animal.

If he knew this impromptu visit would become two and a half hours of walking, he might've seen a movie, a hypothetical ignoring the type of person he knows he is. He was made unreasonably uncomfortable by the idea of sitting in there alone. The appeal of the cinema, to him, was the group activity, and his group record for one auditorium was six. He'd been invited.

The movie was terrible. *Godawful*, one had jazzed, a new word to him. Lousy with "Plot Holes"—also new. He was barely old enough to know movies could be bad. At the time he agreed and prayed no one asked him why. All six of them had laughed their way down that boomerang haul to the lobby, litigated those baffling Plot Holes. Today he can't remember which movie it was and today he saw nothing new. He was made unreasonably uncomfortable by the idea of sitting in there alone.

He did not visit the arcade, though he did slow down and peek inside. All the games were either old (paying per session hadn't made sense to him since the Christmas he got his PlayStation 3) or played in the name of ticket redemption. Those were for babies. While he hadn't done the math with regards to prize value in US dollars versus potential money spent grinding tickets, it must be screwy. He remembers Lego sets on the shelves valued in the thousands of tickets for this fake economy when just one floor down at the actual Lego store those same sets were merely in the tens of real dollars. Herein lied his hypothesis.

Though he was partial to the Crazy Taxi cabinet emblazoned with a high score of his own achievement, he still wishes he picked a better set of three initials. In eleventh place: BOB. His name wasn't Bob; it was supposed to be read as boob, a succession to the classmate who sent a remarkably high winning streak on Mortal Kombat 4 and commemorated the event by naming the final score VAG. His attempted sequel was decisively less funny and only resulted in a small enclave of classmates calling him Bob from then until graduation. Save the one who called him Boob.

On the way out he'd seen an arcade token jammed in the sliding door's rubber weatherstrip, and he thought of coins left on the headstones of servicemen.

High beams blasted stars in his eyes, and he peeked through to his dad waving from behind the windshield. He didn't look before crossing the road, knowing his dad saw and would scold him for in just a few seconds. Walking awkwardly so as not to agitate his stiff jeans, he completed his deflating trip to the mall. He didn't look back.





## Twelve years later

They sell reflective vests at the hardware store.

A convincing hard hat, however, took some long dormant DIY chops. A union retailer one town over closed last spring. What constitutes a job site regulation hard hat is too tricky for one Google search, though he did learn a socket wrench dropped from fifty feet carries the equivalent inertia of a refrigerator. He hopes his bicycle helmet, spraypainted white, will do the trick.

The vest is a little big. Swims on his narrow shoulders. More than once he'd thought to do something about his frame but lacked neither the dedication nor social media incentive to look a certain way. Besides, pencil was *in*, these days. Vampire physique. Adults had told him he was lucky to inhale Quarter Pounders and keep his gut but expect that overtime metabolism to gas out later down the line. Sometimes he wishes he were a little big. Fat, even. *But he would think that*, he thinks fat people would tell him.

In better days this parking structure would be filled up to the nosebleeds. Maybe not the roof, but who picks the roof when the spots by the skybridge are *right there*. Besides, that's where rubber soles melt, and sandwiches forgotten on the dashboard are toasted by the heavens (this came in handy once; he'd forgotten to get his Subway toasted but his simmering car and broken A/C made up for his error).

Today he parks on the roof, as all demolition workers have been instructed.

Or he assumes. The floor level parking was barren of all in-progress demolition detritus. Not even a dropped stick of dynamite, which for a foolish few seconds he thinks professional demomen use—*the fuse is hot!* It's just a shame he doesn't have another untoasted Subway, because todays supposed to be a scorcher.

Mom's burgundy PT Cruiser would've had a better dashboard for sandwichleaving, where it concerns surface area. This car—*his* car—did not. A 1996 Buick Regal with, at best, a shallow chimney beyond the steering wheel. Still burgundy; a semi-metallic dried blood. Smacks of what people thirty years ago wanted their cars to be. He remembers some of the Nintendo DSi XL models were damn near the same color.

This 1996 Buick Regal doesn't have a rear bumper and did not have one when it rolled out of the garage on his eighteenth birthday. A son of a coworker of his mom's owned the Regal first, and in fact this car now being his was but one step in a multi-part punishment for that son getting a DUI in his Sophomore year of high school. Something like the third or fourth step, between the eight PM curfew and restricting calls to his girlfriend. Some kids have all the fun and rear bumpers.

Driving to Wishkah was easy. Only a brief highway surf and a few mall-servicing arterials the developers had to lay from scratch, but to him it was like seeing the space with new eyes. He had never taken this trip looking forward. The passenger side sees all the sights—undeveloped marsh, an old auto repair depot puzzlingly never demolished, the hotel—

He loses his train of thought, thinking about that hotel. He and his dad used to laugh about it when he was old enough to see the comedy in the edifice. It was a big mall; *more* than a mall if you believed the local ads. But a hotel? Moreover, a Regal (no relation) Suites? Who the hell was making the trip to a big shopping mall a multi-night affair? Was this someone's vacation? The seventies. Damn, his dad would say, and he would agree.

Wishkah *was* a big shopping mall. That wasn't just his dad being fair. An all-in-one entertainment district that in 1970s Washington State has no contemporaries. A monument that'll probably never be attempted again. A commercial Hindenburg: there's just no reason to build them this big. Fixing his parking job, he's trying to remember that famous line associated with

the Hindenburg. *I am become death? The horror, the horror?* Never mind. He still thinks the comparison is smart.

A truck parked seven or eight spaces down has a cooler unfastened in its bed. Must be union. He'd always liked the sound of being union. A friend of a friend of a friend was union. Friend once removed, who didn't appreciate union dues eating into his wages. But the teamsters don't need that sort of insubordination in their ranks anyway. They're a brotherhood, and sometimes brothers lend money. Apart from that, union boys have coolers in the beds of their trucks—they have *trucks*, moreover. Curse the Happy Meal-sized parking spaces in the population centers. He'd like to be union, and as of thirty-ish dollars invested in his costume he supposes he is. Should've brought cigarettes just to have. Roll the pack in his sleeve, if union men are the ones who do that.

Naked in the empty space next to his Buick, he sees what looks like a little oxygen canister. Squatting down and looking closer, it looks to be a discarded vape device. Hardly a cigarette no matter how much it may want to be—what he imagines the union men would think if he pulled up sucking on *this* sorry excuse. He slips the silver booster in his back pocket anyway. Energy drink flavored, supposedly. He thinks about it and realizes he doesn't know what energy drinks taste like; despite the many gallons he's let inside him over a juvenile career of unsupervised grocery shopping.

A carpool of born unions unloads from a Jeep parked by the ramp, and he quietly joins their march to wherever everyone's gonna be meeting. Descending the parking structure, one of them looks back his way and nods. The head snap of acknowledging an equal. He returns the snap but his isn't as good. Just looks like stretching his neck. At least his disguise is convincing. Funny, at the very least. His second interaction is laughing along as someone else notices his hard hat is a bike helmet. A violation on some other site, perhaps, but this is a union gig.

They round the corner of Wishkah's north entrance. A rising

sun over the evergreens cuts through the early morning's cryostasis, and he's happy he went with short sleeves after all. Besides, the mall will be air conditioned. The union boys in front sip their big coffees and talk about UFC fights. A notable blunder from a promising young wrestler fighting out of Cheney, wherein he took a knee to the chin at the top of the second round. Sad display because he's really a bright, talented kid, if you're asking the defensive one walking in front who keeps looking back to reiterate he's a bright, talented kid. He might interject, pretend he watched (he hadn't and wouldn't've) and maybe agree about that kid being both bright and talented, but he just realized thinking the air conditioning would still be on was dumb. No reason why. This mall won't exist in six hours.

Around the corner of the east entrance, the boys (if they would accept him as one of their boys) found the main camp. Do they call it a camp? He'd have to keep an ear out for the union jargon. Camp sounded good. Got tents, two trailers, a bunch of tables and equipment lying here and there. There's enough trash to be a camp. Here's where he thinks markings to distinguish the higher authority would be handy. Can't the foreman have a different colored vest? Stars on the shoulders? Is foreman the right word? His bike helmet feels heavier.

*Oh no, oh no*, he tremors, the boys are breaking up, pounding fists and fanning out like fighter jets. He didn't get a fist pound. Two of them make for the closest trailer and the rest just go. Dammit. He's naked *and* the whole school's looking *and* he's on fire. Is anyone inside already? Maybe he can disappear. Do what he came here to do and split. He the double doors of Wishkah's south entrance are held open with buckets. Were he to slip inside really quick, stride with enough purpose and weight in his only good pair of Timberlands (not steel-toed) the teamsters would assume he was needed somewhere in the bowels—

“Hey!”

Oh God, a finger snap.



He's dead in the sights of a man who certainly carries the panache of a special vest or shoulder stars. A genuine hard hat, battle-damaged reflectors, a toolbelt carrying a shiny new spool of Ryobi tape measure, Dickies, boots so schlepped the steel toe is the only disciplined shape. *il capo di tutti i capi*. The cooler must be his.

He hasn't yet spoken today. As he nervously steps off the curb and jogs to the foreman, his head a ping pong ball badly taped to the end of a pencil, his main worry is squeaking.

"You the transfer?"

He says, "yeah, that's me," glad upon glad he didn't squeak.

"Where do you think you're going, then? I can't let you inside unless you're on the list—the structure goes down in six hours."

Normally he'd turtle up, taking a broadside reprimand from his boss. Only this isn't his boss, *really*. All of this is make-believe whether they know it or not. What, are they gonna dock his pay? Do your worst, foreman.

But not yet. He's thought of something smart to say.

"You haven't boarded the windows. Outwards-facing glass poses a safety risk." Good one.

"That's for *my* guys to deal with. Okay? I don't need some footy from the opposite side of the jobsite telling me how to hold up *my* end," the foreman says, burning a hole through the mall with his finger.

*Oh, that's right*, he thinks to himself. He *should* be on the other side of the mall, shouldn't he? Know of any *quick* he could get there? He doesn't say this.

Then he thinks, okay, whatever, he'll just take a walk and enter from the north. What's a seven-minute holdup? Least around the other side he doesn't need to take no lip from foreman... the nametag's hard to read. Ned? Neil? It says Neil.

“Hold up,” the foreman (Neil? Neil) snaps his fingers again. “I need you for something.”

Oh, what *now*? We’re burning daylight, Neil. Don’t you know the building goes down in six hours?

“So, I dunno if you know Dylan, but he’s not here today,” Neil beckons him to follow, “so if it’s alright with Donny—I’ll have Curtis radio Donny—I’ll need someone to fill a slot of mine.”

He’s momentarily occupied with remembering the names and almost misses Neil talking about the basement.

“The basement? Why?” He asks. Can’t sound too excited.

“Sublevel won’t survive detonation, y’know. When everything up top comes down, all that’s getting crushed. I made some calls, but the developers don’t have plans for the sublevel—frankly a sublevel was news to them.”

“Where is it?”

“What do you mean *where*? Below floor one. We ran an audit two months ago and found the entrance hall. Wasn’t on the floor plans, but it’s there.”

It’s real. “So, I’m going down?”

“A squad of my choice is going down but thanks for volunteering. Shouldn’t take too long. Manager of the old Sears told me no one had used the downstairs since the nineties. The problem, again, is getting the door open. I had Curtis try yesterday but the only door we could find’s locked up tighter than... help me out—” he snaps his fingers.

“Fort Knox?”

“Yeah, yeah. *Pussy Galore*. We won’t do it immediately, we gotta do a sweep, but we borrowed some vaultbusting gear from my guys up in Everett—axes, bolt cutters, the big...” he gestures with his hands “—that drill James Caan was using in *Thief*. Should be fun. Did Donny have you on his list for the

inside team?”

“Yeah,” he lies.

“I’m gonna have you copied to ours, go talk to Carlos. And look, I won’t mark you up, but you’ll need to borrow someone’s dome. Place is already unstable and we don’t need Lance Armstrong letting us down a second time.”

He laughs along with Neil, despite not totally knowing who Lance Armstrong is—killed someone, maybe. Took a brick to their head. Neil was too proud of the joke to not qualify him. For laughing, Neil playfully swats at his stomach. He’s feeling more union by the minute.

. . .

“You already got this spiel in the handbooks none of you read, but just so we all keep our jobs and our valuable lives, we’re gonna cover D-Day itinerary one more time. *Jack!*”

Neil snaps his fingers at this Jack, sitting on a plastic table close by. Neil’s got the whole south crew assembled by his personal trailer, every one of them giving him about as much attention as they did their handbooks. He’s elected to stand right next to Neil, for some reason, wishing he was cool enough to treat implosion this lackadaisically. Most people only see this sort of thing on YouTube, but leather-hardened union souls don’t even flinch. *Woah.*

“What?” Jack says. Young, same as himself, but quickly earning his union stripes. Just look at that lean. Check out that beat to shit vest. His legs aren’t even folded.

“Gimme your vape pen thing,” Neil says.

If only he knew Neil would want one of those sooner.

A perfect catch. Neil sucks down for ten-ish seconds and speaks with extra bass as he flashes Jack the pink, square thing in his hand. “I’mma keep this and buy you another at lunch. How much?”

“Thirty bucks,” Jack says.

“*You fuckin’ liar,*” Neil wheezes, unaware this is true. “What was I saying? Oh, right, keeping you guys alive. We got an outdoor team and an indoor team. North side’s the same, but they’re responsible for themselves until ten minutes out. It’s very crucial—so you don’t *die*—that *only* the indoor team be inside the structure at any time. That’s every name on the list—Carlos has the list. Please hop on your radio and tattle should someone goes inside.

“Place has been deserted since last February. I’ve been inside fourteen times—there’s nothing in there worth dying for. I’ve got twenty-four names on the list—twenty-*three* now. Everyone say hi to our friend from the north.”

Nobody says hi.

“Outdoor team, I need you blocking off the roads, setting up that last bit of fence on the east side, uh... make sure the gas lines are off, radio me if they aren’t—same goes for power lines. And whose *van* is that, by the way?”

Neil points over everyone’s heads (snaps his fingers) but nobody claims that van as their own.

“Can we call the repo reaper? Matter of fact, push it closer to the structure—that’ll show ‘em. I’m kidding. Indoor team! You’re working in groups of three. Do not split up for any reason... who the fuck’s that guy?”

Heads whip back to the van. Someone seems to be exiting Wishkah, looking over at the union before getting into the passenger side door.

“Looters,” Neil coughs. “If anyone wants to run for ‘em right this second be my guest. Anyway! You all have your sections. Double check charges, triple check primary charges, radio me if something looks wrong. No wandering off. Plumbing’s been cut, so don’t go using any of the bathrooms... or do. Who would ever know. We got some sunlight but keep your

torches on. Do not exit the structure without your entire group. Questions?"

Jack raises a hand. "Can I get my vape back?"

"No. Anyone else?"

"Can I throw the switch?" Someone else blurts, making his radius giggle.

"No you may not. We're working on a nuclear submarine armed with the suburban Tsar Bomba. If you want the details, it's two keys: I've got one, Samuel's got the other. We're scheduled to detonate at one o'clock on the money but *will* not until everyone on the list is accounted for. So no wasting time."

Got it, he thinks. No wasting time.

Now to find Carlos. He was supposed to do this earlier but Neil had neglected to point Carlos out. What, was he supposed to *ask* someone? He can't bear the thought. With any luck, Carlos or someone acting on behalf of Carlos would come around asking for that mysterious friend from the north crew. He didn't have a problem with identifying himself. It's the openings where he struggles. Introductions are hard.

He's keeping his eyes on Neil. The potential embarrassment of staying glued to the foreman's hip is overpowered by the fear of getting caught in a lie and his enthusiasm for keeping up union appearances. This began with unbuttoning his vest after noticing the boys kept theirs flayed open. Stepping behind Neil's trailer for a moment, he slips off his vest, mashing in some dust and grime with his shoes. Should've done this sooner, he thinks. Something about him was too clean. Typical of the elitist north crew, maybe. But he wasn't your average north guy. He was one of the good ones. One might say he's not a north guy period. You could sit down and have a beer with him, if you were nice and willing to take the beer initiative and if he liked beer. For some friendship, he thinks he'd pretend to.

Returning from behind the trailer, suddenly way dirtier in a

way that confuses the union boys, he notices one group already making for the south entrance. One carries a leather bag and the other two finger the walkies on their hips. Actually, everyone's moving to their stations. No one does this urgently (union gig) but at this point it would be weird for someone to just stand here and watch. Thankfully, he does have a job. All he's gotta do first is locate a fireman's axe or a "James Caan drill." Do they keep those inside the trailers?

*"Junior!"*

Neil hollers at him from beyond the tents, sensing this kid about to go where he's not supposed to. Parental intuition. He freezes, hand on the door.

Neil says, *"looking for something?"*

*"—An axe?"* He says, immediately feeling stupid.

*"Don't worry about that now. Inside! You're with Jack!"*

He's with Jack. At least he's with someone he's been half-way introduced to and lands somewhere in his age range. One (he) wonders if that's how Neil's grouped everybody. Are all the divorcees in one group? What about the functioning alcoholics? The dialysis patients? With such big personalities the union is proud to include in their ranks, efficient jobworking must require a delicate balance.

Jack's loitering around with a third group member. Neither of them are old enough to pass as vested, true union men, but they're sure trying. Already painted in the odd tan lines of manual labor and bandaging the thousand cuts of working with their hands by taking rum shots in their Sprite bottles. Cool as hell. He envies them instantly and viscerally.

"You're with the north team," Jack says by way of saying hi.

"Yeah," he lies again, panicking.

"Do you know a guy up there—Diego?"

“—If I saw his face, maybe,” he says. Still a lie, just not one he’d ever have to prove.

“Piece of shit,” Jack drools.

“Pretty much,” he just agrees. Apologies to Diego. Please take one for the team. “I saw Neil stole your pen.”

Jack looks confused. “Mm? You mean my bar?”

Damn! They changed the words! What, it’s *bar* now? Since when? What was ever wrong with vape?! “Yeah, your bar,” he corrects himself. “You can take mine.”

He unsheathes the (whatever we’ll be calling it tomorrow) from his back pocket, tossing it to Jack who is not ready for a toss. The silver bullet glints off the back of his hand and clacks on the asphalt. Instinctually, he laughs as Jack kneels down, as if to suggest this was a mistake anyone would make, rather than the most inconvenient way he could try and be nice.

Nonetheless, Jack is happy to have another fog machine (to guess at the next word) and while he doesn’t say thank you, he flashes him a thumbs up. “Where’s your name tag?”

“On my other vest,” he says.

“Oops. Well what’s your name, then?” Jack thumbs at the boy next to him. “That’s Otto.”

“... Junior.”

He’d never had a nickname before. Apart from Kid and in some instances Idiot. Neither of which he’d accept if circumstances were up to him (which nicknames tend to not be). Even so, he’d long envied the camaraderie. His real name, he thought, didn’t leave a lot of room for shortening or spicing up. Some names are just like that. Parents should really think about this sort of thing before naming their baby.

But Junior—that had some punch.

Jack feels the name in his mouth. “Junior?”

“That’s me.”

“Cool. Let’s take this walk.”

. . .

Shit. He should’ve brought the film reel.

What’s worse is he was literally thinking about it this morning, right as he was walking to his car. *Oh, yeah, the movie theater has cameras. Those oughta play the film reel, as cameras are ontologically bound.* How wise of him to think of that dusty unloved thing, what had been sitting on the top shelf of his closet since before they moved in the new house, right as he was about to visit a place with the facilities to make use of its cellophane mysteries. Then his stomach grumbled, and he thought about egg mcmuffins or something, and the film reel fled his mind.

Just one time, on the same day the film reel made itself known to him, he’d unspooled a portion and held it to the light. A man sitting in a chair, twenty-four frames in a row. Forty-eight. Seventy-two. So on. Eventually the amount of film unspooled on his bed was too much by any respectable metric but the shot never changed. Man in a chair. He’d been curious what the film was, exactly, or why the previous homeowners left it behind in his closet. For every day he remembered that film reel in his closet the facilities to bring its images to life drifted further away. Warranties expired. For all he knew the movie theater had pivoted entirely to digital.

Sometimes he remembers the man sitting in the chair. Even if the rest of the world won’t.

. . .

Junior had thought this was the largest building on Earth. Looking out from under the canopy of the lime green stroller Wishkah was big in a way he didn’t know places could be. Even when it was just an indoor walkway between the arcade and the Lego store. Today he can’t ignore how small the en-



trance really is. Three double doors for all the people of the world.

“Either of you here yesterday?” Jack asks, switching his flashlight but leaving it dangled from his pants.

Otto shakes his head no.

“Ah yeah, you have that other gig,” Jack remembers.

“Came here a lot as a kid way back then,” Junior offers. Hell of a sentence, dude. Came here a lot, but as a kid, and in case neither clause makes this obvious enough, Junior is talking about the arbitrary way back *then*, which is wrong. Pulitzer stuff.

“Gives me the fuckin’ creeps,” Jack mercifully ignores. “I was setting charges with Clayton and Tristan last Thursday and we kept hearing noises.”

Whoops. Junior neglected to pack a flashlight. All he’s got is the LED pinpoint on his phone.

“And lights! Swear to God there’s squatters in here. We were hearing footsteps and seeing torches that weren’t ours, but we’d check, and the store’d be empty.”

“Squatters?” Junior asks. He really doesn’t know. Jack could be talking about vape pens right now.

“Homeless people. Fuck, I mean, it’s where I’d set up. And *vandals*. Clayton was thinking they found their way up into the insulation. You don’t hear the footsteps on the ground...”

Jack doesn’t stop talking; Junior just stops listening. He was washed with a harsh nostalgia gone down the wrong pipe. It’s always things he never thinks about until caught in the broadside, where it concerns this place. The mirrors, for one thing. Level 1 up through level 3, Wishkah’s ceilings are lined with long prisms of mirror—reflecting the floor below and chewing the interior to a formless non-dimensionality. Hard to tell where the walls end and the ceiling begins even now. Cool in pictures

but nauseating to any first timer unfortunate enough to look up. Just too many lights, too many things reflected at once. The final day is no different; Jack's torch and Junior's phone occasionally bounce to the ceiling and ricochet back in Otto eyes and while Junior apologizes for the first flashbang every time after is Otto's fault. Stop staring at the ceiling like something's there.

It was the community's open secret nobody liked the ceilings. Design decisions like these only make sense if your architect has more experience in concert halls, like Wishkah's did. In the cold vacuum of trace paper and the need to stand out from the Westfields of the east. But it was not the architect firm that would need to spend eight hours a day for several years looking at these tight abstract retail halls. That burden fell to the clerks, whose hatred of the ceiling beget neglect. Sometimes panels would fail or get old and fall out and if the protocol was to order replacements then that's just something nobody did. Depending on the floor, one could look up and see, among mirrors and their own stupid face and stupid, open mouth, Tetrominoes of unreflective space. Kind of nice, actually. A brief reprieve. Ironically more interesting to look at than the mirrors.

Floor 1 had the best luck when it came to retaining mirrors.

The store on Junior's immediate left used to be a Foot Locker. He didn't need the big logo's dusty impression lingering ethereally above the doors to remember that detail. But it does help. In better times for the Wishkah, this Foot Locker had been forced to move closer to the exit. On big release days for Air Jordans and whatever else could be as popular, sometimes the queue would run nearly the whole length of the floor 1. Entrances to other stores were barricaded by enterprising cool kids-to-be. Eventually, as Junior understands things to have played out, the Foot Locker was forced somewhere the lines could instead spill to the outside. He remembers leaving a movie with his parents one night and riding by a long, unwieldy line of midnight release hopefuls, waiting in the rain of all conditions.

You'd be surprised how long Junior's parents could talk about how stupid that is. For *shoes*? Clearly they had never seen the shoes. When the next Monday at school came around, Junior didn't not understand.

"That used to be a Foot Locker," Junior says, gesturing to the vacant lot with a clumsy arm.

First thing Jack points out is the etching above the doors, still clearly giving letters. "Yeah, man, I can see that," he says.

Nevermind.

Betraying its size, these shopping wings were never showoffey in the way an open plan Mall of America would be. Wishkah was restrained about it. An out of context photograph of the first floor south wing would look to the layperson like any other retail space. Wide to not solve the potential cramping issues in the same way adding new lanes doesn't fix traffic. Junior never liked being there on Black Friday or the holiday rush; he remembers how cramped things could get.

Wishkah rotated stores at blinding speeds, but Ol' reliable was the north wing JCPenney only Junior knows they're headed towards. In fact it was the last department store in the mall after management failed to court any tenants for the three massive, empty lots. There on opening day and, to the astonishment of everyone, there at the end. Gave online shopping the rope-a-dope just long enough to spit in the eye. Before dropping dead. Commendable. But Wishkah's JCPenney was notoriously awful all the same. Back when it was Mr. Miyagi's department store of choice maybe Junior would be telling a different story. But the walls were the unique eighties kind of brown and the floor was an inexplicable, pearly white. Just about every fixture inside was old enough to cash out on retirement. And the smell. Not one Junior was hungering to smell again, just one he reluctantly recognized. Like an old house with chemical paint. The JCPenney stands guard at the clear other end of the first floor, but he can smell that bubblegum strip of red carpet from here.

“Five bucks to kick that pillar, Otto,” Jack snorts. The pillar in question is wrapped in black tape and blinking plastic bricks.

Otto clicks his mouth.

“Okay, *ten* bucks.”

Jack may be regretting his figure. Otto drops his bag and bounds three steps forward, taking both feet off the ground to dropkick the pillar right on its weak point (bomb). Junior shuts his eyes, not knowing better than to expect an Earth-shattering kaboom. Definitely not worth ten smackers, even if he was as assured as Otto nothing would happen. Fifteen, maybe.

“How do those things work?” Junior asks.

Doing anything but finger for his wallet, Jack says “y’know, I dunno. Just know you can’t muscle the charges. Saw Mick from the north team run one over with his car a week ago. Know Mick?”

“With the red hair?” Junior lies. Another classic from the genre of pretending to know people.

“Nope, Black guy,” Jack says. “Who’s the firecrotch?”

“Oh, think his name’s like... Hal?”

“He’s old, ain’t he?”

“Pretty old.”

Jack seems to be done with the Hal question. Thank God he didn’t ask for a last name. Junior was about to give him Emmerich.

. . .

Only Otto seems interested in doing any work here. Junior’d be more than happy to learn, he thinks. It’s not every job one gets to raze civilization to the ground. Though he does wonder if he’d have the guts to pull the trigger. Suppose he had his hands on the big lever, despite what Neil said about the keys (nuclear submarine?). It wasn’t just his memories. A whole

community, gone in a neuron fire. A guy like Neil's better suited to that job. A neutral party. Like he could give a shit.

Jack flashes his torch in Junior's face. "You've been here before, dude?"

Aw shit, is this his second time asking? Junior'd been focused on the echo his boot makes on the tile. "Lots."

"Remember where the bathrooms are?"

At this stage of Wishkah's life, virtually all of the fixtures have been moved out, making these wings feel extra nude. This includes floor plans. Your mall is on the bigger side when Disneyland style park maps are necessary. Junior did have the broad strokes of Wishkah's floor plans filed away in his subconscious. Bathrooms just aren't marked on that version of the map. They were marked on the corporeal maps, of course, but Junior wasn't a public bathroom user even in his most desperate moments. Everything about those dungeons is wrong. Gaps in the stall doors, paper towels on the floor, needle disposal tanks more often taken as free needle dispensers. A lawless place, especially the ones not occupying a store and instead burrowed deep inside the walls closest to the exits. Parasites stuffed with even smaller parasites.

"I don't remember, actually," Junior settles. He's unsure if this counts as a lie or not. "But most stores have bathrooms in the back. For employees."

"Really?" Jack snorts. "Didn't know they cared about their pack mules like that. Retail looked like a crock o' shit, that's why I never worked in my own mall. Like, dude, someone from school seeing me in one of those little Foot Locker jerseys? Forget it."

Junior did work retail, once. Got his first job within months of turning sixteen. Hell of a thing to look forward to, working.

Cut the teens some slack, Junior would like to say. Money in your pocket's a powerful thing. What's the largest possible

birthday payday before then? A hundred dollars? He was more than eager to support himself in ways his parents didn't have to (buying junk). And just his luck, Best Buy was willing to hire on zero experience. And keep him on the payroll despite no cumulating experience.

Best Buy's foot soldiers have a saying: got a cigarette? And Junior never did. His Best Buy job had more parking lot cleaning than whatever he could've been imagining as he was bent over at the job fair, signing a paper. Best Buy's parking lot was the first time he'd seen a condom in person. Was sixteen too young? Working a job at sixteen may be what's too young, in a broad sense. Every job should have a trade school attached. At least then Junior would know a little sooner Best Buy wasn't the life for him.

He had waited patiently for his coworkers to start feeling like a family, a moment that never came. A lot of the time the employee turnaround was too quick to connect with anybody, the age gap too wide, the experience gap too broad. His coworkers knew in the tickle on their necks Junior had nothing interesting to tell them. What high schooler does? His inability to say anything cool to these union boys is starting to make uncomfortable sense. The problem was never the job. Unless he can get work standing around idly and feeling self-conscious about his posture. Hm. Sounds like modeling. If only he had a jawline. What was he talking about?

"JC Penny's got one," Junior says, pointing so far down the way he points at nothing.

. . .

So, Otto also had to pee. Either that or he was off to test Junior's hypothesis on employee toilets, excusing himself to the JCPenney further down the wing.

In the meantime, Junior thought he could use a tool of some sort. A small one, something Otto's bag wouldn't miss. Like a spanner. Yeah. His own mid-size spanner, to have and to hold.

Odds are slim anything here will needs spanning, but Junior's caught up in the image of having a tool on his person and feeling powerful for saying spanner instead of wrench. More insider baseball.

Walking back and forth, waiting for his team to stop pissing in a nonfunctioning bowl and definitely not wash their hands, Junior feels something crunchy under his shoe. To be sure, he rolls his boot in an oval. *Crrrrushhh*. Broken tile? No, the tiles seem to be the only thing in here mostly spotless.

Some Wishkah shopper he was, not immediately knowing it's the sand.

Now this he has to see. Bounding up the decommissioned escalator zigzagging JCPenney's floor 1 entrance, he struggles to map the north wing of Wishkah in his head. This is a quadrant he's less familiar with than others, to be honest. Between the JCPenney, the hair salon called Tidle (or something close but still misspelled), the supplements store that definitely wasn't GNC (that was on the second floor), there was never anything over here exciting to a kid. But nobody gets away with not knowing about the sand, even if the source is only available to the tackiest of adults.

Kiki Mauna Lewis. Sometimes when he tries to remember the name it's out of order. Mauna Kea Lewis? Trader Vics? Trader Joe's? No, that's not right. Waikiki Lewis. *That's right*. But no, it's not right. Kiki Mauna Lewis.

You'll be forgiven for getting it wrong; it's a bad name. Pacific island nomenclature and a white tourist mixed in a blender. A baffling fixture for a shopping mall at the gaudiest of times, Kiki Mauna Lewis is a tiki bar that, if you can believe it, was trying too hard even by tiki bar standards.

Why such a thing next to a JCPenney anyone would be justified in wondering. Retail dissonance of the highest concentration. It must make more sense on the inside. Patrons can't see the JCPenney, so they need not be reminded of sweet deals on

boxer briefs while they're drinking their novelty "Devil's Mai Tai" in a tiki bar in Washington State. Junior didn't come of age soon enough to know what made the Mai Tai demonic.

Rattan gates and aquamarine beadcurtains box in the mostly intact façade of Kiki Mauna Lewis. While Junior seems to recall fake Halloween torches outside the door, everything else is still present, albeit unkempt. In the nine months Wishkah's been closed to the public, a lot had been vandalized. Windows sprayed over in hooligan cuneiform. Potted plants shattered because when else can one do that without spending money. Really most of the glass had been kicked in whilst the mall was waiting for its union euthanasia.

That's all inoffensive, if you ask Junior. What really perplexed him was the comparative spotlessness of Kiki Mauna Lewis. Messing with this tiki bar was, to the vandals, forbidden.

He jams his spanner in the crack of Kiki Mauna Lewis' rattan double doors. Jerking to the side, he felt the doors buckle just a smidge, the straw bindings of the otherwise plastic door crackling under the stress. As if he split open a fruit, the stale moldiness of the mall so far was interrupted by Junior's one point of reference: The Home Depot.

He wasn't getting anywhere trying to wrench the door open. So it's a good thing he picked one up.

Seems Kiki Mauna Lewis was designed around the time exposed connections were in style. The nuts and bolts by which the doors were fastened to the wall were halfway exposed, hidden by a plant long since dead. Shoving the pot out of the way (well, he kicked it to pieces; Junior wasn't immune to the allure of consequence-free smashing) he was free to sweat over whether he happened to select the right spanner for the job.

He did not, but with the assistance of his car key jammed in the extra space, Junior had made a flush connection and soon had the door fifty percent loose. As he worked on the second he wondered how feasible it would be to lower the door quietly, a



thought interrupted by the door falling loose and crashing to the tile below, exploding in a cloud of dust and going out of its way to catch every corner and edge on the way down.

This is all part of his fake job, Junior would argue. Suppose a loose bottle of Captain Morgan was forgotten under a thing and calcified into a high-concentration explosive. We need people like Junior going in, making sure that's not a concern. In a way he's a hero and not just nosy.

He trains his flashlight (phone) inside the opened bar and needs to recalculate. See, he was just trying to be funny with the thing about Captain Morgan (Bacardi's the more typical base). What he's faced with now just looks wrong. The exterior facade wasn't the only thing left untouched.

As if the closing staff locked up for the night and never came back, Kiki Mauna Lewis is as pristine as anything left alone for nine months could be. A thin membrane of dust wraps the suffocating interior decorations and shakes loose as Junior stomps across the entryway tiles. His helmet docks with an artificial floral garland as he stops cold, too stunned to step forward without a moment's respect. The sand recalls the quaking of shoes from the bar's final operating day, kept immortal like bootprints on the moon.

*Oh, right*, Junior remembers. What he had stepped on earlier. The sand.

Probably Kiki Mauna Lewis' most infamous gimmick. Beyond the red tiles of the entrance, the downgraded floor was filled up by three inches of loose sand. Imported sand from Nassau, apparently. Junior didn't know Nassau was a real place, but he had no choice but to know about the sand even if he was never a customer. Nobody did. Despite studious custodial work, despite the little wood barrier just beyond the door, despite *everything*, exiting bargoers had a way of kicking this sand to the most inexplicable of places. Sand outside the door, sand down the floors leading away, sand at the sliding glass doors to the parking lot, sand *in* the parking lot, sand kicked to

parts of the mall where it just shouldn't be possible. Sand ten minutes away by walking. And it was only just enough sand to notice. The worst kind.

If the mall would force Foot Locker to move, Junior's sure they made some quantum of stink about Kiki Mauna Lewis' quirky feature. Yet the sand was never removed. One can only imagine the defense put up by management. *Okay, smart guy, tell me how exactly we move several hundred pounds of indoor sand off the ground, and we'll get right on it.*

Junior gives it some thought, as he takes three careful steps into the seating area and feels grains splash inside his shoes. Maybe a Shop-Vac? Two Shop-Vacs?

The bar proper is small in that trademark intimacy. Dense and cluttered like one would want their tiki bar to be. A handful of tchotchke masks displayed with all the gracefulness of hanging a family photo. With respect to wherever those masks come from (Junior didn't know and Kiki Mauna Lewis isn't interested in teaching) they're given roughly as much importance as the ship in the bottle or the... the *hanging* things. He doesn't know what they're called or if they have a name. The glass balls in the hanging nets.

Bafflingly, the lights turn on when Junior tries the switch. *Shouldn't be possible*, he thinks. The electricity to the building's been cut off. Right? Does Kiki Mauna Lewis have their own generator? They shouldn't. Nor should the light switch already have fingerprints.

Ah! He jumps.

She pops up from behind the counter and sprays surface clear like Junior's being there was in the motions of a normal operating day. Pays no mind to the collapsed door.

Junior pretends to clear his throat.

"Hi," she starts.

"Hey."

“Howwww are you?”

“I don’t think... I’m with uh—”

“You don’t think you’re with who?”

Junior doesn’t entertain her rib. “How did you get in here?”

She cleans the crust off a bottle of coconut rum. “The door?” She says like Junior asking doesn’t make sense. “How did *you* get in here? Bar’s closed.”

“Unscrewed the... the door,” Junior points over his shoulder.

“Smart.”

“I’m with the demolition guys. The demo team. Wishkah’s gonna come down in six hours. Less than that, actually. Closer to five.”

She freezes and looks down as if this could be news. “Oh,” she says. “You don’t say.”

“... Yeah, I do say.”

“Duh. Well, *that* creeped up on me.”

“The implosion?”

“Duh. I was keeping time a lot better *mmm...* three months ago. Then it got away from me?”

“How long have you—”

“College,” she snorts. “Six years on the payroll. Look down here.”

She taps her fingers under the counter and Junior leans over. While one must discount all the sand kicked from the seating area to behind the bar, one must also acknowledge the discoloring of the dark wood from years and years of employees polishing the surface with their shoes.

“That’s me!” she says. Proud, almost. “Six years. Ever forget if you clocked in? Or clocked out? Here’s my spin on a

classic problem: I don't even remember where we punch our cards. There's what lack of routine does to a person.

"So... are you gonna report me?"

"No," Junior says before he knows for sure how he feels or who he would report her to anyway. "I don't know who I'd report you to, anyway."

"Oh, so you're union. That's cool."

Junior nods, feeling himself losing position. The vest has to mean something. "Why is everything still... like, why is it all together?"

"Why is what together?"

"The bar. It's all together. Everyone else moved out months ago. What's this place's deal?"

"Oh! You're asking—okay, sorry, you just worded that weird."

"The mall's going down in a few hours."

"We're all gonna die in a *few* years; we still brush our teeth," she shrugs off, moving to the kitchen and projecting her voice. "What's the hurt? So we're irrelevant. What difference does it make whether we clear out or not? Tears in rain."

"But why..." Junior feels stupid for asking. "There was nine months, and nobody showed up..."

She looks up at him through the kitchen line and squints. "You ever had to move outta somewhere real fast? You don't look like you have."

What's that supposed to mean?

Junior means to say this but doesn't.

"I'll tell you what I *won't* miss," she goes on, squishing her shoes to the kitchen floor and snorting when the sand responds with a crackle. "Everyone hated this stuff. Staff, mall management, second time customers—is it in your shoes yet? It's in *my*

shoes.”

“Second time customers?”

“First time it’s kinda fun. An unexpected feature, like when you see a movie in the city and the seats recline. Fun and games at the shopping mall tiki bar. Now the *second time*... that’s what separates the regulars from the balkers. You gotta *seriously* consider your values. Do I wanna walk on sand *every* time? Or would it be easier to just buy a case at the supermarket or, I dunno, drink somewhere normal? Repeats were a... different breed of folk. *Lotta* veterans. Dudes who did tours in the tropics. Either that or they bought the hat at a Goodwill. Shit, it’s what my brother did.”

“Isn’t that stolen valor?” Junior asks. A normal thing to wonder about someone’s brother right in front of them.

“What, are you gonna report him too?”

“I’m not reporting anyone.” To prove it, Junior elects to steal something for himself. A puka shell necklace draped over a picture frame, containing both the photograph of a surfer and a gold coin sandwiched between posterboard and glass. Dusty but just hanging there. He yanks the necklace from the wall and drops it around his neck.

“*Call the cops!*” she snorts. “I’ll be outta harm’s way. Don’t you worry. Gotta pee, anywho.”

“Thanks for, um... cooperating.” Then he remembers. “Hey, if you’re a mall employee, are you allowed downstairs?”

She freezes. “The basement?”

“Sorry. Union jargon. I was just won—”

“No, I know what you meant. Duh.”

“... So do you?”

She throws open drawers in her brain. “I must. No way I wouldn’t have been down by now. I *do* know there’s keys. Swipecards. My boss told me. And the only door that goes all

the way down is... somewhere else. Not my department.”

“Do you have a swipecard?”

“On me? No. Duh. foodservice infantryman don’t get that kind of clearance. Managers, sure.”

“How would you have been down there if you don’t have a swipecard?”

“Orientation? Christmas party? I’ve seen a lot of shit in six years—feels like *more* than six, sometimes. I can tell you one thing: there’s not a whole lot of reasons to go down there. Just like... utilidors. Hallways to other hallways. If you wanna know if it’s worth the trouble, it’s not.”

“It’s a part of my job. I gotta go down there as part of our final sweep. Any clue where I could *find* a swipecard?”

“Are they really called swipecards? I just said that ‘cause I dunno. Is that like the company that makes them? Swipecard? Is it a dumpster situation?”

Junior ignores this. “Would JC Penny have one? Do you think?”

“Oh, yeah, for sure.”

A straight answer here and now is a freshwater stream. “Really?”

“For serious. My manager said all the anchors have swipecards. JCPenney, Super Sears, the movie theater, and uh... Circuit City?”

“Pardon me, would the—”

*“Vous êtes pardonné.”*

“—Super Sears closed in 2009. The Circuit City closed in 2011. Those parts of the mall are walled off.”

“To say they shut the doors.”

“Why would they shut the—” It was at this moment Junior

realized the futility of arguing these details. “So a swipecard opens the door. Got it.”

He’s about to leave. Literally one foot out the door. He tells her to stay frosty (trademark farewell still in progress) and fully turns around before she pipes up again, so urgently she dunks her spray bottle on the counter. “Just one won’t open the real door.”

“What real door?”

“The one I thought we were talking about. Duh. My manager said the real basement needs all four. At the same time.”

Nuclear submarine.

“The real basement,” Junior confirms.

“Gotta be the one with all the stories. Couldn’t tell you what’s down there but... gives me the heebiejeebs thinking about it. Anyway, your funeral. The anchors have your cards, the cards open the basement. Off you go.”

Junior knows about the anchors. “I know about the anchors,” he says, “I came here all the time.”

“Y’know, I thought something about you was familiar. You walked around a lot, didn’t you?”

A terrible closer. Kill confirmed. If even the bartenders in Wishkah businesses he never set foot inside recognize the signature stride of a young Junior, that means everyone did. His fear is real: people did notice, and they did find it odd enough to remember. Adults and well-meaning friends had always told him no one remembers the awkward things you did when you were younger. Not so at the biggest shopping center in Washington. Freakshow at no extra charge, featuring Junior: the amazing listless child with no money and whose only means of stimulation is walking laps around the mall for the entertainment of only the most bored employees. Which turns out is all of them.

“I did walk a lot,” he sighs.

“Yeah, you were like those squads of old people. The Mall Walkers.”

“I’m gonna leave now. Take care. Stay frosty.”

A real union man would make sure this civilian had vacated the building before taking his eyes off her. Nor would he wince when she tells him she likes his shells.

. . .

*“There you are!”*

From the first floor, one foot on the still escalators, Jack waves a spanner. Smaller than the one Junior’s got tucked in his belt loop. He takes undue satisfaction in this.

*“We aren’t doing that floor!”*

“I just wanted to see something,” Junior says. “Found a straggler in the tiki bar.”

Otto perks up, locking eyes with him.

“A squatter?” Jack asks, head tilted up, squinting.

“Sort of.”

“Fuck you mean sort of?”

“I mean told them to leave. Hey, I’m gonna check the JCPenney real quick. Stay there for a second.”

“What?!”

Otto’s eyes follow him out of sight.

Was Jack yelling at him? Does that count? Immediately, Junior remembers the halcyon days of getting yelled at. He and his older cousins, on a rare visit to his house, had gone to Wishkah with all the adults, inevitably having to make fun in the most unfun place of every mall—*clothes stores*. Kids make do even in the security panopticon that is department retail. The circle racks spring to mind, since Junior is looking at one right now. What compels a child to slip and hide inside one he



doesn't know, and why this sent grownups into a blind rage is just as unknowable. Yet another place children aren't supposed to be, doing something children aren't supposed to do. Because kids are supposed to be doing something.

He remembers his aunt screaming at him to get the hell out of there and quit acting like a toddler. Adults can't be expected to remember every time they lost their temper at a kid, but it's fine. Kids will remember every time.

These shining tiles and office style lights may as well stretch on forever. Stores like these are naked without their fixtures. And JCPenney still has fixtures in the way a desert has animal bones. Naked racks and abandoned kiosks. Empty jewelry boxes and vacant cubbies. Dust matted to the crisscrossing rugs and the boys stomping up the dead JCPenney scaring the bejeezus out of him.

It's Jack who gets to the condescension before Junior can get to the defense. "Can you not *run off*, dude? I'd like to be done and out of here before lunch."

"We have to get to the basement," Junior vomits, "Neil told me to go check."

"And when he tell you that? Outside?"

"Yeah, outside. But we need to—"

"Crazy idea, but how about we check our charges and bounce? I got plans later."

"But Neil said I should—"

"You do everything Neil tells you to?"

Sounds like a test. This must be a critical junction for newly formed demolition cells. Jack's trying to figure if Junior's Cool. When told to do extra work on top of what was assigned, a Cool person would ignore it. The Junior Jacks knows, the *idea* of a Junior who has vape pen bar devices to loan out and gets special instruction from the foreman, either does or does not ignore marching orders depending on the lies Junior can tell in

the next few minutes. Junior is whatever he wants to be, but what he needs to be is above Jack.

“On these sorts of gigs the sublevel is what we call the Subduction Zone. In the even—”

“That’s an earthquake thing,” Jack blurts, sucking on the vape Junior had given him. “Didn’t we have a big quake around here couple of—”

“Nisqually, 2001, yes. Chemicals, ignition points, hazardous materials—if we don’t check these variables, *Dude*, we can create a hazardous working space for the cleanup crews. In that case we could be sued for negligence.”

“You mean Neil’s boss could get sued?” Jack says. Good. Better than him asking about Ignition Points, which Junior is pretty sure aren’t a thing.

“It trickles down, trust me,” Junior goes on. “I worked a gig up in Everett where someone... *trying to remember the sequence of events*... someone had gone and dumped waste in the river. Chamber of Agriculture came knocking, and *that* came out of our paychecks. Wanna know how? Lawyers called it Plausible Culpability. Bullshit, but I’m not risking it again.”

It’s a lot to chew on. “For real?”

“For real.”

“How do we get down?” Yes! Jack’s coming around. Holy shit. How did he not check Junior on that Plausible Culpability thing. “I saw last week the doors took swipecards.”

“Oh, is that actually what they’re called?”

“Hm?”

“Neil brought a James Caan Drill but that’ll take some time to set up. We could be down there faster with the swipecards.”

Jack tilts his head to Otto, looking over in spirit. “Didn’t you tell me something about cards?”

Otto nods and glares at Junior.

"Is there one here?" Jack asks.

"Should be. Y'know, these anchors are the spiritual center of the mall. Department store managers always have the highest clearance."

"That's all cool, but the power's out," Jack adds, thoughtfully. "I don't know a card's gonna do you any good."

*Fwick, fwick, fwock.* In a staggered, guttural flush, the long beams of plasma lights flick to life. Over at the wall is Otto, who disappeared into the shadows and found a breaker box most miraculously.

"Attaboy," Jack laughs. "I think he worked retail before this. Guy knows where everything is around here."

"Do you..." Junior starts asking Otto when he comes back, but he stops. He's possessed by the strangest sense of déjà vu. Maybe he'd already asked Otto if he knows about... no, no he didn't. "Have we met?"

Otto shrugs.

"Forget it: would you know where the manager's office is?"

Otto shrugs.

"He doesn't talk," Jack explains. "Long story. But he knows his shit. I guess uh... the office should be easy to find."

Roger that. Junior excuses himself to the employees only double doors, confident such an important means of access would be as tucked away as JCPenney could muster. He's all the way at the door, a neuron fire away from splitting the lock with his spanner, when Jack hollers across what's probably not that long a distance but when the store's so empty feels like miles. "*Dude!*"

"*Huh?*"

"*Otto found something!*"

Goddammit. Walked all that way. Junior jogs back, thinking all the way the coolest, most union way to jog (he's pretty sure he's got it). In place of ten dollar words, Jack gestures to their third like he's bringing him on stage. "Got your card."

"Wha—you... already?"

"Knows his shit."

"Where was—"

Lifting up the corner with his foot, Otto shows the corner where the four strips of long red carpet intersect.

"... They hid it under the carpet," Junior has to agree, admiring the violently red plastic keycard when Otto tosses it over for a peek. He knows his shit, our Otto.

. . .

Turns out Jack is a cool guy. It's not that Junior thought he was an asshole or something, nor had Jack done anything in the hour he's existed to Junior that made him come around. It's just that so much about Jack lines up with the kind of kid who used to bully him.

This one kid, who Junior remembers as a bully, smoked cigarettes. Out in the woods during lunch period. Call him Nathan—pretty good 'seventh grader who smokes' name.

Word in the halls was Nathan had been smoking since he was ten. With what money, at thirteen? Who knows. Kids in Junior's school seemed to just have money with no relatable origin. He had to do *chores*, the kind out of his way and unexpected of him, and *maybe* get money—if his mom or dad had been to an ATM. Never was a kid for which money materialized in his pants but that's not why he wasn't smoking. He wasn't smoking because he wasn't welcome in the smoking circles. What he would *give* to be peer pressured.

Instead, the kids (who Junior imagines grew up to look like Jack) told him to fuck off. Were those movies where people "bum" cigarettes off each other like it's no big deal feeling him

a fantasy? Either or, now it's Jack who "bums" nicotine off of Junior, in the form of a palm-sized silver canister found in the parking lot, confirming his expectation this is how friends are made.

What a friend Jack could make. Already world-weary at... whatever age he is. Young enough for it to be remarkable. He tells Junior he toured Germany in hostels, which Junior didn't know were still a thing. If that wasn't good enough, he lives with his girlfriend. In the same house and in the same bed. Junior's still in the paddling pool of saying *girlfriend*; in Jack's world, that's his *girl*. The chasm between them grows wider by the apropos.

"Haunted fuckin' house in here," Jack blows out the side of his mouth. And what a Jack way of putting things. Emotionally divorced from Wishkah in a way not dissimilar to Neil. The difference is Neil came here with a job to do. Jack will happily jump the barrier of a kiosk just to stand on the other side.

"That used to be a Chuck E. Cheese," Junior points to the multi-lot vacancy. Just saying these words momentarily replaces the dull moldy odor of the dead mall with bad pizza.

Jack chews on this piece of trivia. "Ever hear about them selling old pizza? Like, taking uneaten slices from two separate pies and reheating the combo? Saw it online."

Sounds real, but Junior's not sure he buys it. Sure, Chuck would be spending less on ingredients by selling more pizza per pizza, but how worthwhile are those extra dollars? When a table buys a pizza, that's just it. Thine pizza hath been purchased. Charles isn't losing money after the fact. That's not how selling food works. And think about the kind of people that work the Chuck E. Trenches. Can't be that many Michelin star chefs back there cranking out plain cheese for precocious children. How would this stay a rumor? All it would take is one disgruntled dropout, fired for smoking in the walk-in, and Mr. Cheese would have its own Deep Throat.

"Probably why they closed," Junior agrees. "Did you ever

go?” He then asks. *Did you go to Chuck E. Cheese as a kid.* A thing you ask people when you’ve known them for an hour.

“... Can’t remember. Have to’ve. But I might be thinking of a similar... y’know, kids arcade.”

For having a cool guy disposition, Jack answers questions like an adult talking to a toddler. This can’t be the sort of conversation happening at the German hostels. Whatever Junior says next needs to make up for such pedestrian

“My sixth birthday party was there,” abort abort abort abort

“Where’d you say the cards were, bro? Anchors?”

Bro? “Anchors, yeah,” Junior says, thankful he doesn’t have to carry that birthday thread. “If we just keep going this way—”

“Yup?”

Answering his phone so fast Junior can’t remember if he heard a ringtone, Jack starts leading the team in the other direction. This is not the right way to get to the next anchor. If memory serves him right, this way used to lead to all of the girl stuff. Pottery Barn, Victoria’s Secret, and so on.

“*Sick. I’m there.*”

He’s where? Jack slips his phone back in the kangaroo pocket of his hoodie. “Pit stop, boyos,” he says, already walking the opposite way, “we’re going to the arcade. Know where that is?”

“The... that’s back the way we came.”

“Mhmm, and my house is *that way*,” Jack points to the middle nothing sarcastically.

“We’re... we need the cards. The next one’s in the old Circuit City that way.”

“And we have like six hours to get to all of that, dude—”

“Five hours.”

“Relax,” Jack more or less orders. “I’m trying to yoink one

of those arcade machines. Clayton just told me there's a Ms. Pac-Man in the arcade, still. Y'know that would fuck."

"Arcade *cabinet*," Junior finds himself saying. "Official term is cabinet. *Can we—*" he starts before aborting, aware suddenly his tone is just so petulant.

"All in favor of going to Circuit City."

Huh? A vote? With no warning, Junior hasn't the time to get his hand up.

"All in favor of the arcade."

Jack raises his hand. So does Otto(?!). Well, the fact he doesn't vocalize his opinions doesn't mean he should be denied a vote. Democracy wins, and Junior begrudgingly guides his cell to the arcade. Now there's a route he could take in his sleep.

. . .

Everybody deserves the pleasure of running up an idle escalator. Better yet riding an escalator the moment it breaks. Proof in practice the engineering genius of kinetic stairs. Functional even in a state of non-functioning. How many other mechanical advancements share this distinction? The lunar lander could not land lunarly if all the insect legs popped off. Unless the astronauts are really careful—they'd still have been driving manual back then.

For all he knew, there was some ulterior protocol for patrons in the event a loaded escalator breaks, and for some reason it wasn't walking up or down. Maybe you're supposed to wait until a technician comes by with a jack and hand-cranks the escalator themselves. Because suppose, should a person put pressure on the mechanism while its inactive, the tension keeping the steps in place may fails and shifts the steps into neutral, flying down like the teeth of a chainsaw, spitting the uncompliant guest onto the floor below. In the escalator biz, Junior thinks this would be called "rollout." Many hypothetical lawsuits failed due to mall patrons instigating rollout on their own,

a result of not following procedure.

All of this is something Junior is totally making up as he, Jack, and Otto bound up the idle escalator. He can imagine it so vividly in his head for a second he thinks it might be true. He clutches the handrail a little harder.

At its peak, Planet 16 took up Wishkah real estate roughly equivalent to four lots. One and a half Pottery Barns, by his estimate. One got the impression the owners wanted to keep the place humble. Despite the tokens rolling in, one was never too far from a Galaga cabinet. Contrary to what contemporary arcade managers may think there's nothing wrong with the boomer cabinets. Adults look for what they played as kids and kids actually do like old stuff if you hand old stuff to them. Virtual reality Pac-Man means nothing to no one, which Junior suspects is the reason Planet 16 saw a decline in repeat customers over the years. This decline includes himself.

But how could anyone forget a carpet like this? To the windows and the corners, that swirly red and black pelt was plusher than the roads most traveled by. The foot traffic highways are stamped flat; may as well be hard wood. A sign of a carpet well-trounced and an arcade well loved. Newcomers like Jack and Otto could mistake this ancient, unvacuumed and unshampooed color for a dark grey.

Planet 16 unspools before them. Walls must've been knocked down to ensure the arcade was one aggregate experience. Apart from the conjoined bowling alley, the private event room, the one single karaoke booth, and the airsoft gallery, Planet 16 was a savannah. Everything just mentioned that wasn't the raw arcade didn't get many repeat customers anyway: you were either a bowler or an arcader but seldom both at once, the event room was too stuffy for opening birthday presents, karaoke without drinks doesn't make sense fundamentally, and the airsoft laser thing was thirteen bucks a play. As if management observed what newer arcades courting wholly different audiences were installing and, with no foresight, thought this



was the way to survive. A small concession, that bowling is hard to screw up.

“Lights are on,” Jack points out. “Who was it, said the power was off?”

Otto and Junior have to shrug. The Japanglish *Dance Dance Revolution!* and just weirdly enunciated *Hydro Thunder!* don’t wash out the ears easily. Alzheimer’s patients forty years from now will probably still clear *Butterfly*. A-rank, at least.

Jack yells for his friend, “Clayton!” which isn’t returned, and Junior’s about to suggest this Clayton might be back behind— “YO CLAYTON!!!”—Jesus Christ okay. “CLAY!?”

Believe him, Junior’s about to go on a whole tangent (in his head) about that whole yelling people’s names *shit*. What, is Clayton gonna jog all the way here? Are you two gonna MarcoPolo the whole length of this one-floor, one-room, empty arcade? Y’know you can solve mazes by just hugging the right wall? Imagine doing that but it’s a big square.

He only gets about this far when Clayton answers.

“*Jackoff! Machines!*”

The boys pick up the pace, allured by functioning cabinets and lack of supervision. Obviously Junior can’t deny his own investment. Lead a man to arcade cabinets. But his worry over wasting keycard collection time hangs in his frontal lobe and won’t go away. Is he the only one around here interested in a super-secret basement? Anyone? Guys? Clayton?

Clayton has an idle animation not unlike the video games flanking him. When Jack’s in greeting distance he claps his hands and licks his lips. Something’s stuck in his craw, no doubt shoved in there by the other two boys in his own cell—Tristan and a boy whose nametag is hard to read but, to Junior, looks like a Danny.

The latter (now Danny until further notice) throws Jack a water bottle he just barely claws by the cap with two fingers.

“Hydrate me daddy,” Jack woofs.

“Y’know, y’know,” Danny says. What a way to talk to people.

What confuses Junior more is what immediately follows Jack’s bafflingly small sip of water, which is Jack then bumping him in the shoulder with the half bottle and swishing the inside like it’s an offering. Huh. So this is how union men hydrate. Well, he surely can’t *decline* the offer, not when there’s this many more bodies to impress. He takes the bottle and indulges the circle with a respectful gulp of water, only to choke to tears on what he now understands is a stealth bottle of vodka.

The boys laugh (to say they go *oooooh* with the fist to the mouth) but it’s not registering as scorn for what Junior understands to be a party foul. In truth, he’s never had a Shot before. Oh, he’s come close. Had the Shot on the kitchen cabinet, full and waiting. But after a minute or so of pacing and sniffing like a curious cat only to smell chemicals, he instead took incrementally small sips of what’s already a small serving of liquid, thinking maybe his mouth would get used to the burning (it didn’t). In the end, he thinks he took too long getting the Shot down, and while the whole thing was drunk he felt nothing close to what he expected from being Drunk. Or even Buzzed.

This feels closer to what was supposed to happen, that first time. The appeal baffles him still.

Nevertheless, he drinks, and his reaction could be excused as merely going down the wrong pipe. Making a good impression here, Junior, but take greater care with the first thing out your mouth than the first thing in.

“Here’s the team Neil put me with,” Jack tells Clayton and his boys, slapping shoulders. “y’all know Otto but this is Junior right here. From the north crew.”

“Oh, this is *Junior*,” Clayton repeats. “Of what?”

“My *Dad*,” Junior leans on hard so it’s clear he’s willing to

goof.

“Cool, okay—*Junior*. That’s funny. Yo Jackoff, did Tristan tell you his heart exploded this morning?”

Quick to correct his friend, Tristan snatches the bottle from Junior as if this were an intervention and the holder gets to talk. “I said I heard a *popping noise in my chest*,” he coolly corrects, “I did not say it *exploded*.”

“You said *exploded* in the car. Hundred percent.”

“What had happened was I was getting out of bed and made like a—y’know like this—stretched my arms out and heard like a *\*pop\** in my... this part.”

Clayton knows. “Your sternum.”

“The ol’ sternum. So I looked it up and a dude on Reddit said it’s the same as cracking your knuckles.”

“Popping your knuckles?” Clayton.

“*Exploding* your knuckles?” Danny.

“I feel fine, like,” Tristan waves his hands. “Just it wasn’t a dull pop like in the knuckles. Sounded like a water balloon going *pwsshhhh*, y’know?”

It’d behoove Junior to add something to the chest popping dialogue. Something funny or reassuring to Tristan. *Here’s why your heart probably didn’t explode*. But he doesn’t know anything about sternums and frankly wasn’t familiar with that bone. He thought it was called the solar plexus.

It’s Clayton who gets things back on topic. “Trying to see your *girl*, Jackoff?”

He briefly thinks this is directed at him but remembers Jack is Jackoff. And that’s Clayton with the Zoomer mullet, and *that’s* Tristan with the bandana, and *that’s* still Danny.

The whole supergroup makes for “Jack’s girl,” who Junior forgot for a moment is referring to Ms. Pac-Man. If he remem-

bers correctly, the major design difference between husband and wife (boyfriend-girlfriend?) is the speed of gameplay. Ms. Pac-Man is faster; blisteringly so. The connoisseurs Pac-Man. Call that lady Cognac-Man.

Junior wonders if this quip is good enough for sharing with the group as they try to return power to the milky blue cabinet. In vain, Junior might add. Tristan and Jack are pawing the back side like that's where the switch would be. Typical behavior of the kind of arcade ignoramus who calls them *machines* with no shame.

"The power switches aren't on the back," he finds himself blurting.

Tristan is the one who looks up, wiping sweat from underneath his bandana, tied over his head and under his hard hat like a pirate. "So, what, they're inside?"

"Behind the coin door," he points from the hip.

Makes sense to Junior. He's no clue how these snappier, presumably more responsible guys with real jobs don't get it. Why would arcade operators have it so any rando can give the cabinet a reach-around and cut the power? Things may have been different in the seventies—when arcade games were called shit like "Bolt Action" and players leaned down to a fake periscope to shoot at plastic tanks that flipped into the ground at the chime of a bell—but why would that be what comes to mind for adult men born after 9/11?

Clayton is already on the scene with bolt cutters, snapping the lock off the coin door and, to their delight, throwing the gate open to an avalanche of quarters, then their chagrin when a flashlight revealed these quarters to be NCV tokens. They were, however, artifacts from a soon-to-be extinct mall, so everyone took a handful.

Proving Junior's hypothesis correct, the boys find a switch behind the coin door and bring Ms. Pac-Man out of stasis. Here they witness pleasures normally reserved for the arcade em-

ployees, like the cabinet's boot screen. An eye-straining cacophony of digits and colors, the cabinet deciding if it's in the mood today, followed by the sound off of Blinky, Pink, Inky, and Sue.

"Holy shit, four hundred thousand," Danny says, putting two fingers directly on the screen and leaving an impression in the dust. "You gonna let someone do that to your girl, Jack?"

"Is that good? Did the guy with the necktie pop in here or something? Let's see if..."

Jack slams a token in the cabinet and gets to work. He assumes the determined arcader's stance: one hand on the joystick, the other gripping the side like one would a stick shift. To his credit, Jack is an above-decent Ms. Pac-Manner. He knows the trick where you bounce Ms. Pac-Man between the two sides of the board until the ghosts are running a more optimal path. On top of this, Jack can recognize what precisely that optimal path is, given the state of the board. There's no book on this stuff.

Drifting off to the other tarped cabinets, Junior is delighted to feel the top of a plastic chair beneath an extra-large blanket of green canvas.

"My pulse is probably too high for this," Danny says out of nowhere. "Jack, I tell you I got stung by a wasp last weekend?"

"Already know, dude," Clayton tssks.

"Bitch, I asked Jack."

"EpiPen gang?" Jack entertains him, still focusing on his game with chess grandmaster intensity.

"That's the thing, right? You don't know if you're allergic to stings until you're lookin' down the gun. Remember how me and my cousins are working on that deck for my aunt? Out in Shoreline? So we're—"

"Oh, so not the deck you're building for the aunt who lives in Kalamazoo?"

“—Fuck off—so we get all the old boards out and we’re taking a break, having a few beers in the truck—”

“Holla.”

“—Thanks for the adlib, dude. We’re having the break... my aunt comes out and says there was an old wasp nest under the deck. Right in the corner by the bricks. We tell her, y’know, it’s old so who cares. We’ll check it later. I don’t really fuck with wasps because apparently they’re way more aggressive than honeybees and their stingers—”

“Lotta preamble, dude, get to the violence.”

“Can I set. A goddamn scene.”

“HEYHEY, COME ON OVER HAVE SOME FUN WITH CRAAAAZY TAXIII,” the Crazy Taxi machine belches at a decibel somewhere between a 747 and the atom bomb. The boys over

“YEAH YEAH YEAH YEAH YAH,” Dexter Holland blurts immediately after, queueing Kevin Wasserman to tumble into a tasty guitar riff, pounding kick supplied by whoever did the drums.

The boys over at Ms. Pac-Man jump at the absurd attract mode of the Crazy Taxi cabinet Junior’s just uncovered and fired up. What a generational divide, these two games. The soft sophisticated bubble of the Ms. Pac-Man cabinet, utterly drenched by the screams for attention from Crazy Taxi is in aggregate a dividing line between Junior and the rest of these guys. He’s very nearly thrown Jack off his groove, who does seize at the explosion of sound but quickly recovers to his game unperturbed. Has Junior miscalculated what everyone would be interested in revisiting? Are those bar style cabinets actually more appealing than nineties maximalism? Given the choice, and the truck to lug it home, Junior would take the Crazy Taxi ten times outta five. The boomer cabinets get a dozen rereleases before lunch; he doesn’t know where one plays CT apart from the raw hardware (the memory of a Dreamcast port floats gen-

tly in the back of his head, unseized in the moment).

Could've sworn there was more racing games in here (Crazy Taxi counts. Racing against unemployment). Those plastic seats and gear shifts always felt like the most valuable arcade experience. Two tokens instead of one, on most cabinets, but the amount of game one got was more than justified. Plus these games always seemed to be more generous—easily more than two tokens demanded. Always willing to throw the skilled player another race for their efforts. The best of the best on, say, Cruisin' USA, got to play like six races in one session. And if they placed first on all six they got to see a girl in a bikini. These herculean efforts by confused preteens to see even the softest of cores used to build character. Teach a kid something about the national interstate.

Was it Cruisin' USA, which had the four seats linked together? Junior might be thinking of Cruisin' *World*, which may have come a bit later. But he could've sworn one of the cabinets around here was four cars hooked together for intense four player competition. Junior was never so fortunate. Three friends at once? Get real.

He seems to recall the mega-cabinet around one of two corners something could be around at Planet 16. Ducking away from the Ms. Pac-Man crew and all their nonchalant physical conditions, he flicks the smartphone flashlight back on and walks, slowly, into the unlit chimney of the arcade. Every blanketed cabinet is another tango with the bedroom mirage, clothes piled on a chair looking like a person. The trick shot bounces of light from the entrance to the tiles along the wall give him undue shivers. He wonders if he could ever trounce this mall on his own. Or if the monotonous, gaping maw of the stripped wings and low visibility would have him running for his Buick Regal. Thank Neil for wingmen like Jack. And Otto, why not.

His next couple of moves in these next few hours may secure him a group. His number on someone's contacts. Dream

big.

Speaking of groups.

Junior is blessed by a carpet of shadow, that these guys don't see him jump out of his skin cartoon style when he sees the six of them come barging out from behind the old ticket redemption counter. Picked clean, of course. Nary a tootsie pop nor dart pistol to be pilfered (he would've taken the dart pistol). When the boys all hop the counter in a grapeshot Junior sticks up his flashlight instinctually, blowing his cover but, alarmingly, delighting these guys.

*"Squatter!"* The tall one points, substituting aggression with amusement. *"Squatter!"*

"I'm not!" Junior insists, fumbling for a corner of vest fabric to ball in his fist. He flashes the reflective tape like a clipped badge, realizing with a gulp he doesn't have a name tag. "I'm with the union!"

"Who? South crew?"

"Yeah. You?"

He meant for that to be a clear and obvious question but sounds more accusatory. As if both of them wearing the reflective vests means someone's gonna have to change.

The boys catch up to Junior, their own torches illuminating the scene and... what a fashion statement. Their vests are a deep blue.

"Nah," the tall one says. "North."

Well, isn't that just charming. The north crew has their own vests, completely distinct from the south side's. Where does one get a blue reflective vest, anyway, much less this swanky, statement-making shade? Gotta be specially ordered. One might say, oh just throwing this out there, someone claiming to be from the North team would no doubt have one of these special blue vests? And a dirty liar could be identified by their noted lack of a north crew blue vest. Worst case scenario, if we're



okay with hypotheticals, is *not* having a blue vest and a bunch of blue vested north crew bona fides parkouring in outta nowhere who can attest to never seeing this guy in their lives—

“I’ve been sick for a while,” Junior vomits. “And I used to work up north. In Burien.”

The tall one (silver nametag says Austin) is flashbanged. “... What’s your name?” he asks.

“I’m called Junior.”

“By who? Them?” Austin points his light over at the intense Ms. Pac-Man game, what feels like miles away.

“Yeah, uh, so, I was called to work down here by some... some higher up guys, I don’t know. They know Neil, foreman for those south guys that-a-way. Ever meet him? You guys mingle ever? Anyway, they called me cuz one of their guys didn’t show, but honestly we’re just hanging out mostly, a lot of the work is already done—”

“What higher up guys?” Another one of the north crew boys wonders. “The company? Are you talking about Rob?”

—Rob. Yes. I got a call... from Rob... this morning. Sucks because I’m working off a bad hang over from last night. But we’re here. Honestly we’re not taking the gig too seriously. Me, Jack, Danny, the other guys. like... we’re not even talking about *work*, really—”

Another one of them trains their light on Junior’s vest. “Where’s your colors?”

FUCK

“Forgot! I got called while I was... pumping gas. And I was closer to here than I was to my apartment, I thought... eh, I’m gonna be working with a different crew anyway.”

Austin nods. “Is that a bike helmet?”

Forget Jack looking like the sort of kid that used to bully him; Junior thinks maybe Austin literally did. Too tall to see

someone so emotionally diminutive, too cool to need the approval of strangers. His blue reflector vest appears almost velvet, open and well-worn. The moment he walks away, Junior will cease to exist.

He keeps it going. "Backseat of my car—"

The fourth one stops all of this. "Hold on, didn't you..."

Seconds feel like hours. He stiffly points back at the ticket redemption desk. "Someone left a note for a *Junior*. Over in that closet. Know about that?"

He knows about no such thing. This is a chasm of fibbing Junior isn't gonna try. That's the kind of alluring, unexplored chimney that gets men trapped. "Just now?" He asks, making no claim one way or the other. "That door there?"

When he points, the door is illuminated on cue. A light source too powerful to be fired from this far away. Couldn't be Junior's pathetic cell phone flashlight. Someone else is responsible.

"Who's that?"

"You're holding the phone, dude," one of the boys snorts, followed by a chorus of accompanying snorts like Junior said something truly boneheaded. And true, he is indeed holding the phone, but that's not his light. Infuriating to the point insisting otherwise would feel pathetic. But that's not his light.

Instead, Junior asks "what did it say?"

"Back in the office," Austin agrees, "this note on the whiteboard was talking about a Junior. Says you're from the north team. Or are you a different Junior?" He's amused himself. "Imagine you meet two in one day."

"Can we... go check?" Junior asks. "I've been around the mall a ton already, really keeping one note distinct from another in my head's kinda... yeah, can we see?"

"You can," Austin shoos. "Hey, are you the one turning on

the games? Is there a Pac-Man machine in here?"

*They're called cabinets*, Junior keeps in the drafts. "Ms. Pac-Man, actually. But my boy Jack's already claimed it, so you'll have to talk to him."

Oh. They *are* gonna go talk to him. Forthwith, even. Just as quickly as they entered, the north team makes for the south, leaving Junior the only spotlight at the other end of Planet 16. Apart from the other one. An investigation like this would be better with some company. One other person who agrees that wasn't Junior's light.

It's a small portion of employees-only space. Minimum wage is also sometimes minimum break room. Twin steel racks take up most of the short hall, roughly as long as the counter outside. Empty, with some ripped edges of paper and exhausted, rolled up stickers. One of those boys who was just in here must have ripped the sticker off a Ryobi brand power tool and stuck it to the table here. Really the *only* interesting thing in here is the whiteboard, which it must strain to be. The company of four dry erase markers tapped out a long time ago. Clearly all four were tested before the writer settled on red, the top left corner tattooed as it is by opaque swirls of black, blue, and green. Red, subpar but the most readable of the four, is the winner:

#### NOTE TO JUNIOR

LEFTOVER CABINETS POSE RISK OF EXPLOSION.

REPORT TO ROB, AS ANY MEMBER OF THE NORTH  
CREW WOULD KNOW TO DO IN THIS CASE.

U21TNAH EHT 2NOC2D KEYCARD

Huh. Junior wonders which Roman emperor they were quoting at the end. That would be easier to check than deducing whoever the fuck could've written this. He wasn't Junior until ninety minutes ago. Frankly the thought borders on what Junior understands Eldritch to mean, and he's already taking a picture of the whiteboard. Contrast scaled down to make the faded text

more readable.

Should Junior need to read something in another language, he takes a photo. Or a screenshot depending on what's being read. Google Lens' translate feature makes quick work of any taco truck menu or interesting road sign. But the funny thing about pictures is they come through flipped, on Junior's phone. Funny thing about cameras. Newer models automatically correct this, but seeing as Junior didn't drive here in a Rolls-Royce, nor does he keep his spanners in a Louis bag, he doesn't have the newer model.

He's about to use a secondary camera app's flip image function when the whiteboard note catches his attention in a definitely Eldritch way.

NOTE TO JUNIOR

LEFTOVER CABINETS POSE RISK OF EXPLOSION.

WOULD KNOW TO DO IN THIS CASE. ERP  
-ORT TO ROB, AS ANY MEMBER OF THE NORTH CREW

AUSTIN HAS THE SECOND KEYCARD

. . .

The kids who believed in ghosts had all the good stories. In the terminal lucidity of many a dying conversation, Junior saw well-adjusted people briefly jaywalk into hard believers of the paranormal. *Have you ever seen a ghost?* Some people are locked and loaded for that question. A bit too eager to season a coat rack in the dark with prose and poetry, if Junior is correct on those being different things. It's almost always a child, and if being a ghost isn't enough that child also has to say something scary. *Get out of here?* What, are you doing something with the space? Ghosts must not bother entertaining jerks locked and loaded with pedantic junk like this.

Junior thinks he knows somebody, then the ghost question comes up—usually when the alien question fails—and outta nowhere that normal person doing pretty alright for themselves

says in no uncertain terms they believe in both an afterlife and the reality of the soul. And it's not like they *can't*. Just that that's a big thing to learn about someone, and a bigger thing to self-identify with. Know what he's saying?

While he's agnostic to ghosts, at best, he's more than willing to try given recent developments. Faced with the only decisively paranormal encounter of his life, he remembers *this* little lead shield: ghosts only kill people in movies. Of all the ghost stories he's listened to on YouTube and all the frantic accounts of extended family, no one ever gets hurt. Artists are quick to give their fictional ghosts violent traits, but the real\* ghosts are never so bold. Apart from freak accidents (he imagines a ceramic plate poltergeistied against the wall and shattering in just the right way for shrapnel to slice a human neck) they're downright gentle.

So what is he to make of these ghosts? An evolving subgenre of helpful, benevolent ghosts with passing-to-active interests in Junior's personal quest? Assuming that's what they are, and Junior figures now the only way to know for sure is taking their advice.

He'd rather not walk proudly into this hurricane of lies now focused on the Ms. Pac-Man cabinet, in truth. One of his own creation, yes—no need to rub it in. Austin's gonna be a tricky nut to crack. Junior already gets the feeling he doesn't like him.

Distrusts him, at the absolute least.

Finds him generally weird, at a heretofore unmarked chimney of least.

But guys that die trapped in caves still get to be famous.

He's completely ignored by the company of orange and blue vests encircling the cabinet. Now Austin's playing, and if Junior can trust his quarter second glance at the screen, Jack's bumped up the high score to somewhere in the mid six-digits. Impressive. So maybe they haven't been talking about that weird cagey guy who might be lying all the time.

Rather than say anything, Junior merely floats around the Kuiper belt of this backseat arcading, waiting for someone to give a shit. And it takes a couple minutes. Had to wait for their firecracker style conversations to reach their point of periapsis.

“—He got it turned on,” Jack ends up saying, getting a finger up over the heads. “If you were so smart, Austin, you would know they aren’t called machines.”

Austin does not look up from his game. “No shit?”

“Uh-huh, scrub. They’re called *dressers*.”

“Cabinets,” is what Junior’s saying underneath the sudden surge of *oooohs* as Austin deftly jukes a cornering of ghosts. He’s about to scratch the face of Jack’s high score, and if they’re doing what Junior thinks they’re doing, this will determine who gets the cabinet. The ghosts pattern about the maze is slightly randomized, from game to game. What they’ve done, in essence, is put Ms. Pac-Man in the middle and let *her* decide who she’d rather be with.

But she’s cruel. The star-crossed gamers of the eighties learned this painful lesson and neglected to pass it down to the next idiot who fell in love. Everyone feels the burn of heart-break; today it’s Austin’s turn on the ride.

What must equate to twenty-four seconds of additional gametime, Austin attempts to cross the board and finds himself in a tricky cover 3, risking it all on an additional cross that Blinky’s already checked. Ow-ow-ow-ow-ow-ow-wap-wap. The heart wants what it wants.

Austin gives a steel-toed kick to the coin return, curses (he says fuck), and falls back into the audience. The south crew claps Jack on the back for a cabinet well fought for and Junior knows he should do the same. He kinda squeezes himself between the cabinet and the other boys and throws an arm out Jack’s way, only Jack steps away at the last second, Junior’s fingers barely grazing his shoulder blade. Rats.

“*You had me?*” Jack jokingly directs at Austin in a way that

sounds like a line from a movie. Escapes Junior but gets a laugh across the aisle. “Sorry. Pretty good gamers in the south crew. Coulda gone pro but I twisted my ankle in college.”

“Kay, how about uh,” Austin says, scanning Planet 16 like he’s gonna lay claim to another game, only to pivot last second, “—double or nothing.”

“Fuck you, you lost,” Clayton reminds him.

“It’s just, y’know, I thought y’all were pro gamers.”

“Twisted his ankle in college!” Junior repeats to no reception.

Jack, maybe too brashly, more or less agrees to double the wager. Whatever that means here. “Dude, I will whip your ass anywhere; let’s do MK.”

“Nah, since your ass wants to be Toretto, let’s hit up one of those driving games.”

Isn’t that just convenient: Junior had just got the Crazy Taxi cabinet up and running.

“Crazy Taxi’s on,” he offers. He means it, but this pit in his stomach opens up out of nowhere like it was dumb to suggest.

“Not really racing, is it?” One of the north crew boys points out. Doesn’t matter which one, Junior thinks.

“No,” he has to admit, “It’s more time—”

But he’s cut off again by Austin. “What, they don’t have any double-seaters in this motherfucker?”

They do! If only he could inject his memory of Planet 16’s roster into the heads of all these dullards who call a cabinet a machine or, in niche cases, a *game*. Then they’d know to dream bigger than a double seater.

“Daytona USA takes four players!”

Tristan laughs, “shit, didn’t know Daytona was bad like that.”

It's not immediately shot down like Crazy Taxi, "Ooookay, where's that?"

Planet 16 has a soft decline at the back end. A sneaky sort of ramp so shallow it's tough to notice even in years of patronage. But the back is slightly lower than the rest of the arcade. Now it's a cramped canopy of tarps, so dense it's tough to make out the silhouette of any individual cabinet. Nevertheless, it's Otto who shoves his way through the boys and points down at a stretch of equal height towers, unified by a flat, conjoining arch.

There's a pause. "That it, dude?" Jack asks.

Otto nods.

. . .

The south and north crews separate for a moment to select their two representatives. Austin and his crew have their team really quick: it's Austin and someone whose name Junior immediately forgets. But between Jack, Clayton, Tristen, Danny, and Otto, well, those are personalities so strong Junior forgets to list himself.

The boys totally unfamiliar with the hardware deal themselves out, meaning Tristen and Danny. Looks like it's gonna be Jack and Clayton without objection.

"Is this the game with the naked chicks at the end?" Clayton wonders.

Jack laughs. "'Scuze you?"

"Like at the end. When you win. This it?"

"No," Junior answers, so much wrong with that he doesn't know where to begin.

He was only trying to say that much, but this quarter-step of Daytona USA knowledge gives Clayton pause. "You play this before?" he asks, freezing midway through slipping off his vest.

"Couple of times," Junior lies.



Regulars of Planet 16 know the rare, quadruple player Daytona USA. An anomaly for American arcades known for only ordering one—*Maybe* two. But remembering it's here and knowing jack shit about the mechanics are different schools of driver. Like most arcade racers, there's a gear shift. Junior's not fond of manual transmission, nor its necessity in high level video game racing. For Pete's sake, *Nintendo* figured out how to permit drifting without a stick. What's Sega's damage? Second or third reason Junior does not nominate himself for south crew representation.

"Dude, you can just smack into corners, it's fine," Jack pre-supposes, "I think it's mostly random anyway."

"Think so?"

"Yeah, yeah—blanking on what it's called but I know dudes in the back get speed boosts outta nowhere. These are easy."

How could a man who drove a car to work say something like this. Poor kid's gonna get massacred out there.

Christened with a fist pump and a sip of water bottle vodka, samurai sharing a cup of sake, Clayton and Jack are about to take their seats. Except Otto's already taken one of the seats.

"Oh, hey man," Jack says more amused than offended. "*You* played this?"

Otto bites his lip and nods almost arrogantly. He fingers Jack closer, who leans over the seat, looks at a note on Otto's phone, and turns back.

"You're up, J."

J? Is Junior J? *Is Junior J?*

"I thought you were playing. Bro."

"Otto says you're good." He gives Junior an endorsing slap on the back, handing him the bottle. "Michael's secret stuff," he whispers. "Do the south proud."

Come on, Jack, think. How could Otto possibly know that,

even if it were true? And where's he getting that from anyway?

Junior does nervously sit down in the final seat, furthest to the left, now directly under the attention of both the south and north crews in the penetrative way that makes his hands and back sting with sweat. He leans over to Otto, focused on inching his seat back and forth.

"Where have you seen me play this?"

Otto doesn't answer. He's collecting four tokens from Jack, handing Junior four. The segmented dashboards are loaded with wagers. Whatever the boys had in their pockets: cigarettes, a Zippo, a handful of Jolly ranchers (all grape), an ORCA card one can only hope has money on it, maybe eleven dollars in singles, and a disposable vape (strawberry guava ice). Instantly he's brought back to the tradition of kids placing tokens directly on the arcade cabinet they campaign to play next. Seems one kid went even further, years ago, jamming their token directly between the screen and the plastic housing.

"I think you've mixed me up with someone else," Junior insists. Otto shakes his head like that can't be possible.

Tokens loaded, the tinny sounding announcer asks the drivers to please select a racecourse for what must be the first time in years. He sounds excited to be back in the role. Even the electronic backing band has a brighter spirit about it. Unclear who has control over course selection—maybe it's everyone—but the expert track is picked without a vote.

The next screen, car selection, is not car selection. Mission Select, the game is confident enough to twirl in fat cream-colored cursive. It's a choice with social cache, a choice Junior wasn't ready to make and figures he wouldn't be ready to make even if he knew it was coming. Automatic transmission on the left, selected by default and insisted on by the steering wheels stubborn haptics. Max speed 315k/h. *Beginner*, the game feels the need to specify. This is what Otto picks, hands off the wheel.

Thank God someone else is choosing Automatic. Let Austin and that other guy pick Manual, the sweaty tryhards. Have fun smacking that stick around. Junior would identify as a racing game fan if he were asked. The safe certainty of automatic transmission means the drivers seat can better execute on the fantasy of hitting whatever 315k/h means. They could use some guarantees right now.

Manual transmissioners have the advantage of a max 325k/h, granted. Totally in theory. Assuming they can handle the black magic of the gear shift. Is that 325? Now Junior's not sure. He has to sit up and lean forward on the wheel, because the color palette flips manically between normal and inverted colors on the selected transmission, which Junior currently has panned onto manual and is still hovering over when the timer rolls down to zero, locking his choice.

Otto regrets this before Junior, it seems. Oh shit.

Because he needs to be doing something other than imagine the next few minutes (bumping into walls, forgetting to shift gears, shifting gears when he's not supposed to, bumping into falls heretofore unbumped), Junior lurches up out of his seat, knees pinned against the steering wheel, and snags the token lodged in the rubber threshold of his screen. He drops back into his seat and grips the cold metal warm, praying this manual transmission shit is a straightforward thing. Shift up when the speedometer hits the red. Shift down to take sharper corners. Shift down, turn, tap brakes, throw the wheels back, reorient, shift up, gas. Simple. He knows that much.

Wait, why does he know that much

## **GENTLEMEN START YOUR ENGINES**

For the four-player configuration, Daytona USA divides the boys up by some truly rare color choices. In the red car it's Junior, Otto in blue, Austin in yellow, and that other guy in green. The single player cabinets never let you pick a color, Junior knows that much. This is gaming history, displayed for an audi-

ence with zero appreciation. All they care to notice is the volume of four interlinked cabinets all blasting the same canned exhaust sound effect and a punishingly nostalgic song layered four times over itself. You'd hear this song from orbit.

*How long are you supposed to hold the gas before the starting light*, Junior has but seconds to wonder, and his leg works autonomously, pumping the pedal in double time which for reasons he hasn't the spare brain cells to articulate feels correct.

## **AAAND THEY'RE UNDERWAY**

For the hardest track in the game, it has a way of hiding a fist behind the back. The course opens on a long bridge, generous enough in its length and spill into a shallow curve for Junior to get a grip on shifting gears. On the first shift he nearly forgets, seizing the stick so fast he jams his thumb on its metal neck. From second to third he's confident, one hand on the wheel and the other calmly flicking down to third just as the pack makes the first checkpoint.

## **TIME EXTENSION**

Passing under a bridge, Austin's blue car slides in from Junior's blind spot, slamming him starboard side and bouncing into a shallow turn. But the intense arrows posted above the turnpike warn of a hard right. He sees it before Austin does; he's not gonna have enough control to avoid hitting the barrier head-first.

Someone's shouting advice. Junior and Otto both. Useless under the earthquake roar of a sound system so happy to be alive. The roar of Junior's red car rings in his ears. Makes his teeth rumble. Does he shift down first, or turn? It's gonna be tight either way. And surprising himself, he performs both actions at the same time, throwing the stick up from 4 to 2, rolling the wheel with his palm and, when through the corner, throwing back up to 3. Every motion felt correct, and he sends a second drift as the track curves to the left.

## **TIME EXTENSION**

In another straightaway, Junior anticipates two deceptively long curves before they happen, confident in the drifting motion. No longer snapping the stick where it absolutely must be at the last second, maneuvering the shift in an organic triangulation is as second nature to him as turning the wheel. To be clear, with himself, this is not a game he should be so familiar with. But he's hardly looked at the minimap and, to be a preteen gamer about it, this track is his bitch. On the next

## **TIME EXTENSION**

he's bullish enough to take his eyes off his own screen and check on the progress of his rivals. Austin understands the mechanic of drifting but is having a hard time putting it to practice. That other guy is fucking up everything there is to fuck up. Otto is astonishingly relaxed, arms loose, hands on the wheel with the intensity of holding a computer mouse. Instead of pursuing his own ideal driving line, Otto seems to be following three car lengths behind Junior, mirroring his actions save for one. They're about to drive the other side of that long bridge at the start, and Junior, unfocused and watching the other three's gameplay, is about to ram into the barricade. Perplexed, Otto casually overtakes him, and Junior can barely get his eyes back on his own screen to narrowly avoid disaster.

At the end of the bridge, Junior looks around his HUD. He'd missed the giant green numbers indicating player position, finding himself in fifth overall between the three human and

## **TIME EXTENSION**

Twenty-four computer drivers. Over the second bridge is where the corners get exceptionally brutal, and it seems all four players willingly or unwillingly eat a corner bump here and there. At the right angle, however, Junior can pull out the same tiny boost Austin seemed to get off of him earlier.

## **WHITE FLAG IS OUT; THIS IS THE FINAL LAP**

What pride, to be bored of the final lap. He tunes out just enough to hear how pumped the boys have grown. Seems that rumble in his seat wasn't a game function, but rather Tristen shaking the sides violently when Junior pulls off a clean drift or takes a new position. He breezes into first before the second stretch of bridge, and the only position he lost is more than los-able, with Otto easing in right behind (fighting for his position, frankly) him to secure a decisive south crew victory.

## **A NEW WINNER**

## **WELCOME TO VICTORY LANE**

## **YOU MADE IT**

Everyone has to applaud, which they do by terrorizing the cabinets. No time before now, not even delusionally, has Junior felt like this vest belongs on him. As soon as he's standing up, Jack thrusts the bottle back in his hand and it's like the burn is a warm hug. Better than the actual group hug the south crew pulls him into. He doesn't know. Hugging boys is kinda weird.

As double or nothing winners, the south crew has their pick of the betting pool. Jack takes back the vape, Clayton takes the cigarettes and all but one of the Jolly Ranchers, Danny takes the last piece, the cash is evenly distributed among the crew, and Otto takes nothing. For Junior, the Zippo.

"Talk your shit, losers," Jack talks shit.

"If you think about it, it's a tie," Austin says, shaking his head and using his vest to fan cool air on himself.

"Oh yeah, how?"

He points at Junior, who's trying to flick the Zippo and hurting the skin on his thumb. "He's north crew."

"Yo *tell me* how you shell out for fancy colors and don't know who you work with," Clayton laughs, not buying this.

"Nah, it's true," Jack has to agree, "Junior's here 'cause

Dylan can't get out of bed."

Austin laughs. "He's filling in for fucking *Dylan*. Hey, sorry for thinking you were full of shit earlier."

*Did he actually?* Whatever. Go with it.

"All good," Junior coughs.

"So uh," Jack rubs his hands, "leave me my cabinet?"

With a bitter wave of the hand, Austin says "yeah, fuck you, whatever. I'mma walk outta here with something, swear to God—"

"*Did you find a swipecard in the closet back there?*" Junior vomits out. He may be a little buzzed.

"Swipecard—what did you say?"

"If you wanted something special," he's now saying, giddy and warm, "there's uh... down in the basement—four swipecards open the door."

Crickets.

"Sorry," he says, "the basement. There's stuff down there no one's seen in decades. Actually, nobody knows. But you can only get inside with keycards—"

"Oh yeah," Jack seconds, thank God, "you mentioned that. But I thought you said Neil brought... what did you call it, a Caan Drill?"

"But we won't have *time*," Junior insists. "We only have like four hours before we gotta be outside, right? If you guys are interested in opening the biggest time capsule on the... *west coast*," (Junior thought it best to leave some room for bigger time capsules elsewhere) "we need to find all four. I have one, and Austin, I think you have the second."

He checks the pockets of his vest. A folded receipt, one dollar, another folded receipt, a promising shape that's actually just a BioLife compensation card, and a card he examines pri-

vately with his palm.

“This?” he flashes Junior’s way.

Jumping in, Otto pulls the card from Austin’s fingers. In a way this is fair. He hasn’t taken a prize yet.

. . .

“What’s up, man?”

He’d been thinking of how to greet Otto for six minutes. Henceforth the three-man cells of Jack-Junior-Otto and Clayton-Tristen-Danny were a supergroup. New Kids on the Backstreet Boys, and all the slower moving for it.

The mean average chicanery per minute (CPM) has shot up an alarming, unacceptable were this job supervised, level. The panes of glass not smashed by several months’ worth of urban explorers and vandals being honest with themselves are finished off by a south crew, drunk on victory. Junior had tried to smash one himself, swinging his nifty spanner, but the embarrassment of needing three swings just to spiderweb the glass meant he never tried more than one. A good boy but for the grace of poor upper body strength.

A *what’s up man* isn’t enough to make Otto speak, but he does return a chummy enough nod. He’s walking far ahead of the supergroup. Interestingly so. Like he doesn’t wanna miss something.

“I’ve...” Junior points behind himself, meaning Planet 16 but he’s off by one in a half turns. “I haven’t played that game much.”

This must be what adults experience trying to talk to *him*. Perhaps Junior heard some genre of grunt in response to this, but that may have been his shoes on the tile.

“You told Jack I was good,” he tries again.

Otto raises his eyebrows as if to say *you were, dude*. Definitely calling him dude, probably. They’re close enough.



“... Like, I did well, but how would—” oh, better question: “have you also been seeing... people around here? Not the—not the union. The demo—I mean like *people*. Y’know?”

Otto doesn’t answer. Instead he watches his own hand graze the stainless steel railing, feeling out the declines in integrity from all the shattered glass panels.

Guess he can keep a secret. “Earlier, when I was in the... the tiki bar, out by JCPenney. Kiki Mauna Lewis. Everything was still there. All the decorations, the tables, the drinks behind the... the bar. And the bartender! She was still there, and, like, she didn’t know what was going on. Or it was *like* she didn’t. Do you know what—oh! And the arcade. Behind the prize counter, this note on the chalkbo—the whiteboard. The only reason I knew Austin had the swipecy was because the note said.”

Zilch. At best, Otto is listening politely, to say doing everything short of telling Junior to shut up because he doesn’t care. Does Junior just look like someone good at Daytona USA? What a person to look like. *Maybe* he’s flattered.

“The note was written backwards,” Junior adds.

Finally he gives Otto pause. Just not from befuddlement, no. The way he stops for just a half step and looks up he just seems to remember something. As if what Junior’s been saying has finally come together. If only he’d share with the class.

“Do you know what’s going on?” He tries again.

Oh he for sure does. He just won’t say so because he seized the right to be the quiet one before Junior could. The bastard!

“Tell you what I think,” he muses out loud, only because Otto won’t judge or interrupt him, “I think there’s a *lotta* people in here. Hiding out inside Wishkah. I remember hearing stories about the basement as far back as grade school. It changed a lot, y’know. All those stories do. My neighbor had told me the Wishkah now is the second version, and the first

had burned down. Thus the second was built on top. And, like, the ground was raised up—whatever. I think he was lying. What I mean is it's a story. And I bet there's people *here* trying to get down *there*—"

He hesitates when Otto nods like he's onto something.

"Right? It makes sense. Of course I'm not the only one who would think to come back. Give it one last shot. When I was... Sixteen? Seventeen? I had tried. Found some stairs going down over by the Sears and got yelled at by security. Now I know it wouldn't have worked anyway. But I did see, bottom of the stairs, there was this door..."

He only loses his train of thought here because he's worried he may have slipped up a second ago. What did he say? *Of course he's not the only one who would think to come back?* That doesn't instantly reveal he's a liar. Right?

Right?

Junior unearths a newfound gratefulness that Otto doesn't talk.

"Anyway, the window..." he tries to go on. "I peek over, and right beyond the short little hall to the door, there's another hall. Like identical to the first. Like the way to the basement has an airlock setup. It's uh..." and he realizes too late this part of the story has no payoff.

"Just interesting."

Nice save.

Him and Otto walk for a bit in silence. With men of action like Jack, he hadn't had the opportunity to just soak in the dead mall. Junior's always been mixed on that name. Malls are the only thing he can think of that are called dead while they're still walking. *Years* before, sometimes. The first time he had heard Wishkah Shopping Center be labeled a "dead mall" was six years ago. True, maybe it was well in dead mall contention by the wider internet's merciless definition but, like, come on. Any

mall keeping the light on at *JCPenney* still has a knife between its teeth. Surely. But Junior was one to talk. He'd happily call any mall a dead mall so long as it wasn't his own. Any mall not in Washington, any mall not the backdrop to the last time he really felt happy, any mall not about to take the last things he can recognize about his hometown down to the foundations. And he scoffed when he heard the Titanic was unsinkable. Some things really do feel too big.

They've made it to the Pantheon. At the center of Wishkah, equidistant to the four anchors, was a giant punched hole of open space. The neutral zone, where nothing was sold and patrons could just rest. Soak in a massive half-dome skylight. The developers must've had higher hopes regarding what Wishkah would be to the community, back in the seventies. As much social center as it is shopping and entertainment. Fact is people come to the mall because that have business—or would like to but for lack of money. As such, the tables and chairs of the Pantheon made the space an honorary food court. Little else.

In his prime visiting years Junior never spent much time in the Pantheon. With friends, maybe. When they bought food and the abstract spattering of tables on that floor were occupied. But something about the openness of it all gave him the creeps. That's where he most felt like he was being watched. Eyesight searing the back of his neck. It was a feeling he got all over Wishkah, but most intensely in that empty nucleus. From where, he couldn't say. When you look up all you see is yourself looking down—well, that and the spiderweb. Not actual cobwebs, but the little point in Wishkah's sea of mirrored ceiling where the Stillwater reflection was smashed. Somehow his eyes always find that shatter point. Even now. Right up there, up where the freestanding elevator shaft meets the ceiling. Every blemish has a story. How did that mirror break? Ninety feet in the air? He couldn't replicate that damage with a baseball, and he's a good enough arm to at least make contact if he tried real hard. Some vandalism is for fun, and some is for glory. The kid who breaks a mirror that high up is immortal, in a (stupid)

way.

He doesn't get the same feeling now, not when all the tables and all but a handful of chairs have been removed, leaving only a hurricane eye sprinkled with scraps and leftovers from evacuating stores. This used to be the loudest part of the mall, where babies would audition for the German opera and moms would laugh too hard at things that aren't funny. Now it's peaceful, and that uncomfortableness Junior had felt when the feeling was being watched is the feeling of seeing what's so unfathomable large yet so obviously not long for this world. The Pantheon is empty. It's over.

The south crew elects wordlessly to take a break here. Otto looks down over the railing, then up at the mirrored ceiling, which works like a yawn the way he gets everyone to give it another peek. Still as nauseating as ever.

Jack hits Junior's shoulder with the back of his hand, passing the vape. He'd done this once earlier, which Junior had passed on (not because he was uninterested but because he was grossed out by the thought of putting his mouth on the same thing Jack had been the past ninety minutes). True he'd found that thing in the parking lot and handed it over without so much as a courtesy wipe, but you can't expect him to remember that when he's busy thinking about other people's backwash.

"Saw you were trying to talk to Otto," he says while Junior accepts the little metal thing, taking the tiniest itty bitty drag and trying with all his power not to cough. "Don't take it personally. We think he's got a condition."

"What?" Junior squeaks. "*Condition?*" he asks again, whispering.

"I mean he's cool, and he busts his ass working, and turns out he's cracked on Daytona, but I remember the *day* he joined the crew he handed me this note. Or he handed Neil the note, and—y'know, we all read it. Forget what it's called but he's got a thick tongue. Or some shit. Can't make words."

“He’s a mute,” Junior says, something he might’ve heard in a movie. While it’s completely wrong, Jack can’t correct him.

“Something like that,” Jack perpetuates. “I’ve heard him try to talk before. That’s the wild thing. He’d get excited and sound like he was already talking. If that makes sense. But it wouldn’t make any sense. Trying to remember something else about his note,” he scratches behind his ear, “but it’s—oh shit, yeah, that’s it! He’ll write something down if the something is something I gotta know, y’know? The first time... what’s it called...”

As Jack is trying to remember the name, Junior realizes where exactly they’re standing. The vacant store to his immediate left used to be a GameStop. On the smaller side and, chalk it up to the region, one with detectable Xbox bias. His family had sided with house Kutaragi back when the game system kicking around the house still wasn’t up to him. The PlayStation 3 could play the (at the time) new-fangled Blu-ray discs, which attracted his dad more than whatever the Xbox 360 had in the way of home entertainment. An impressive system anyhow, that PlayStation 3, outclassing most everything else Junior had seen up until then—clearing his GameCube brutally—but when he came of “playing video games online” age, he found himself marooned on a sandbar. The evergreen state was Microsoft country. It was easier to assume any kid’s rec room, with its boomerang couch and dusty pool table, had a 360. *Too easy*, in practice. How often had he made preorders at that GameStop only for the clerk to hand him the Xbox version? And why was it so humiliating to correct them? *Pardon me, good sir, beastly sorry to do this, but we will in fact need the PlayStation 3 version. Know what that is?*

The very next generation would vindicate his involuntary drafting to the Sony army, but this GameStop wouldn’t roll as fortunately. A peasized location, its business covered by the Microsoft store back the other way. By the time no one needed Wii games anymore, the GameStop was on niche life support that barely left it hanging on past 2014.

Between then and now, a bougie cupcake parlor, of all things, would take its place for less than a year before it too dropped off. Wasn't around long enough to make this nook of Wishkah's second floor anything but a GameStop in the hearts and minds of Junior and... at least a few other people. Let's be fair.

He pulls up the metal gate, already an eighth of the way open, and makes a meal of walking inside. Heel-toe, heel-toe. Sockets in the walls tell of shelves wot used to hold used video games. When Wishkah was where he would kill time, Junior had browsed this GameStop enough times to grow familiar with the games that never sold. Even if it's the one copy in the store, he remembers games like Perfect Dark Zero hanging around long enough to gather dust. He may be one of the few shopping mall biologists to observe, in real time, the GameStop employees stop talking to him. *It's just that kid again.*

These evenly spaced sockets are so obviously for shelving units he has no earthly clue why this vacancy's cupcake successor never spackled them over. No wonder that place closed. Especially when the people are so starved for thirteen dollar cupcakes.

"Treasure?"

Tristen, followed by Clayton and Danny. And unless they need some receipt paper and swatches of carpet so stamped down they return the stomp of a shoe with something like the knock of a door, then no. There's no treasure.

Following the herd, Jack whistles and checks behind the round, naked counter as left abandoned by the cupcake people. "So what was this place?" he asks, trusting Junior to know.

"GameStop."

"Thought this place smelled sweaty," Clayton snorts. He has no idea how close he's just come to a lecture on cupcakes and decade-long vacancy. At the last second, Junior decided it wasn't worth it. "Y'know my brother *managed* one? Worst job he's

ever had, he tells me. And like, he's a truck driver now. Amazon. So pissing in water jugs is a better gig than running one of these."

"Oh, dude, I remember what I was gonna tell you a second ago," Jack barges through.

"About Otto?"

"I thought he was actually brain damaged when I met him the first time. Which'd be fine, right? The company talks a big stink about equal opportunity, 'employing the mentally handicapped' or whatever they say."

"No shit," Tristen sets up a joke, "they hired Danny."

Danny trusts his words to be stronger than any shoulder punch. "Didn't you think your heart exploded this morning?"

"What I'm *saying* is," Jack keeps going, "he passes me this note. Fucking gibberish. Doctor scratch. I brought it to Neil because, honestly, I wanted to get him transferred. Note was my proof. He looks at the note—you guys know how Neil reads shit like an old person? *This* far away from his face? Then he says 'oh, Jack, he's talking about his throat condition. He just had a brain fart and wrote *condition* backwards.'"

"Interesting," Junior says. Pretending that's something people do on accident. A funny anecdote to be shared in this whale skeleton of a GameStop, but he files this away.

"Y'all see where he went?" Jack then asks apropos Otto talk, stretching his neck to look back at the shadowy annals of the stockroom behind the trading counter.

Clayton tries to say "he didn't come in here with us" but is cut off by Junior's blurting.

"He's out by the railing."

"I was with you, dude," Jack reminds him. "We were talking about him. I thought he came in here with you guys."

To prevent a panic, if that's what was about to happen,

Clayton suggests that Otto “probably wandered into an empty store, same as us.”

“He’s going to the cinema.”

Attention turns to Junior. Elaborate, inspector.

“That’s uh...” Junior finds himself uncomfortable leading the charge, “it’s where the next card is. Or probably is. Up on the third floor.” Thrice his train of thought stalls, as movies make him think of cameras and film reels and a man sitting in a chair, seventy-two, ninety-six, one-twenty, one-twenty-four.

Here he thought the other guys would be just as fascinated with the basement as he is. But this quest marker falls dull on the ground. Rather, Clayton suggests they leave him to his wandering and, just a suggestion, check one of these charges like they’re supposed to have been doing.

“He’ll be out when it’s time,” Clayton adds.

“Eh,” Jack stretches, “Neil’s gonna be pissed if we don’t all come out together. Let’s uh...” looking behind his head, Jack starts to walk backwards, out of the store, checking out the drop-off and the Pantheon. “How about some of us go check—what is it—unit 6B, and one of us hunts down Otto. If he went right for the theater he must know where that... *card* is.”

“Who cares about the card,” Danny argues, “honestly.”

“You’ll care when your paycheck’s cut for Plausible Culpability, dork.”

“What the fuck are you talking about?”

“That’s the job! We gotta check subduction zones and shit. Junior, tell him.”

“Subduction zones,” Junior sheepishly repeats.

Two absolute nonsense pieces of jargon short circuit their brains long enough for them to decide it’s fine. Reality bends. In a shrug contagious like a yawn, the boys bid the GameStop farewell. Cupcakes lost to the tides of time.



. . .

Now isn't the (actual) food court a sad sight. In better days the semicircle of quick service foodstuffs beneath the massive, windowed backslash, floating views of the Olympic mountains on clear days, offered Little Caesar's a rare sort of romanticism. Today the windows do nothing but wash prisms on deserted stalls and render this ex-food court the only well-lit district of Wishkah. A black light on the college dorm room. Try not to touch anything.

Junior was just thinking this to make himself laugh but, lo and behold, there's a lone ankle sock buckled on the floor beside what used to be a Sbarro.

Left to right, if he has this correct: Sbarro, Orange Julius (replaced by Jamba Juice in 2010), Mediterranean Crush (family owned), Taco Bell, Auntie Anne's, Panda Express, La Japon, Jersey Mike's, and from there his confidence takes a nosedive. That's barely ten percent of what was here and what's been here. He seems to recall a Johnny Rockets somewhere between the La Japon and a different gimmick Japanese offering called Sushirito—which was what it sounds like. In fifty years this food court has hosted something north of two hundred different stalls. Many of those don't exist anymore, and many of them counted the Wishkah food court as their final location.

In more modular food carnivals you got stalls on either side and tables in the middle. Functional but understandably slapdash for the more ambitious mall architect. Some potted plants aren't enough, no, think *bigger*. Think of *Feng Shui* (the least you could do—Panda Express is *right* there). The developers' solution was taking cues from Parisian café corners. Western European alleyways with little bakeries tucked away. Places that only exist in travel guides. As a result, while the food court is more than navigable for the frequent visitor, newcomers are easy to spot by the unconfident shuffle of the feet. *Where do we sit?*

Without all the plants, the abstract geometry of the dining area is obelisks from a forerunner kingdom. A grey wash to the white tiles they seems to burst out from, snaking between the tables to create naturalistic booths and partitions. Stunning, among only its contemporaries. It's understandable why this type of late seventies futurist punch would be attractive to the developers. It's just, if you ask Junior, something they should've thought about in conjunction with their big, big windows. Because the fact is these brushed concrete stalagmites make it so you'd could be sitting down and eating, you could be looking at the Olympic mountains, but you could not do both at once. An odd choice to force on someone whose barely got their head around Sushiritos.

Junior lets a hand skate along coarse concrete as he passes through, knowing this is the last time. What is it with touching things not long for your world. He's been doing it since he was a kid. When's the last time he's gonna be up at the Space Needle observation deck? Better gunk up the windows with fingerprints. Don't forget to touch the exterior supports. Golden Gate Bridge? Full palms. *I'm never washing this hand again*, for it has brushed the shoulder of Justin Timberlake. They say photographs have a way of replacing memories. It's more valuable to just keep those things in your mind. Junior keeps them on his hands.

Then he remembers he can just touch it again on his way back. But that'll *really* be the last time.

He's walking up the escalator and chases a faint memory. Something to do with this right escalator is gnawing at him. Reorienting himself seems to get him closer to the problem, spiritually. What had he been thinking about, a little bit ago? The last time he was walking up one of these dormant things. Subduction? No, that was the other thing he made up. Halfway up he feels himself getting closer and when he turns around and places a hand on the rubber gutter words cascade down the back of his neck something like *don't tell me you've never been to a house show*.

*Right. This is where that was filmed, wasn't it,* Junior asks himself rhetorically. Forgive him, he never thought it was that great a movie. The box office backs him up on this one.

Junior's always felt starved—robbed, maybe—of good or at least significant movies and shows set in his backyard. One would think the New York and Los Angeles screenwriters don't care to represent anywhere else. There is *Frasier*, which he's never seen, and *Sleepless in Seattle* which he's also never seen (he might be the problem). Assuming either one captured a single frame up here. He doesn't know. Something, something, tax breaks, no one cares to set up production outside Tinseltown (Atlanta) but the romantic fools who *must* film where their film is set. As it happens, Wishkah is one of those backdrops. A film was filmed here, years ago, only now he's beginning to think Film is too congratulatory a word. *Diesel Power* doesn't warrant it. A movie was moved here.

In the sleepy, totally made up town of Redwood, Washington, a gang of high school seniors and film club members (good lord) dream only of loading up in a van and getting out of this stank phony armpit of the world. They dream of Hollywood, especially filmmaker-to-be of the friend group David (played by a young Ethan Embry, post *Empire Records* and pre-*Vegas Vacation*). Getting their van before graduation, however, won't be so simple (why getting this van is time sensitive Junior can't remember). Enlisting the help of the movie's resident funny character Richie (Paul Rudd, actually) they... well the full synopsis doesn't really matter. Really none of the movie matters to anyone who wasn't around for Wishkah's shift to a filming location.

Midway through the movie, there's a date scene between two peripheral characters, a friends to lovers arc doomed by the narrative. This date happens at Wishkah, and the screenwriter was generous enough to use the real name. The surrounding area wasn't so lucky but maybe Wishkah management penned a savvy clause ensuring their promotion.

Why does the boy say *don't tell me you've never been to a house show*, he's still trying to remember. Is it even the boy who—wait, abort, nevermind, that line is in a totally different scene. Forgive his bad memory of this mediocre movie he's seen maybe once. An unremarkable Gen-X coming-of-angst, as was the style at the time. Spoiler alert, but they do get the van by the end of the movie and, get a load of this, only one of them uses it to move down to Hollywood. The rest fan off to follow their passions elsewhere. He's butchering the details, but it was definitely stupid. *Teens want a van / teens get a van* isn't really a story on its own but that weak, deflating, *well, guess I'll see you guys around* sort of ending has gotta be the most frustrating kind of obligatory swerve. Not worth a rental. An ecological niche already filled by your *Singles* and your *Reality Bites*.

He stands by that cutting summation but accepts this isn't why the movie stands out to him. While the principle cast of the movie is stacked with 90s Mumblecore it-boys and that-girls (he just now remembers the Ethan Embry character's burnout older brother is played by Ethan Hawke), virtually all the extras were sourced locally.

Hiring extras outside the blurry Los Angeles border has to be a gamble. A trade down. In Hollywood the extras are also actors, to say people prepared to be on camera. People who do not sweat the prospect of being in a movie. In practice these people vanish. Beautiful people occupy our interest in the foreground. Beyond the aperture there is only the suggestion of people. They're there because people should be there, and they are only characters in the diegetic sense. Movie screens are titanic and attention is the tip of a needle. Career extras know this.

Demonstrably, Washington extras show up to check off a line on a very stupid bucket list. If a director could fly in all their extras, their top men, people they can trust, they would. Otherwise it's any number of freaks. For these people being *in* a movie, just in frame, of all possible capacities, is reward enough. It can't be the money. Sure as hell can't be the craft

services.

He only rags on the extras because they'll never know, and because it's what makes this Wishkah movie date scene so notorious for the keen-eyed cinephile. Beginning at the food court, the Paul Rudd character is having a quick snack with his date played by... somebody. She had a very gummy smile. And bangs. Keyed in viewers may detect some disconnection from the girl in the early steps of this ambitious tracking shot, as she feels this guy out and weighs whether this date will be worth completion or if she'll have to feign a family emergency. But it's on the escalator where these two really bond for the first time, remembering when their shared AP History class screened *Barry Lyndon*. As the screenwriter has bafflingly decided, no one but these two liked the movie. And they go on and on about this movie Junior's never seen, doing very little but justifying the lack of cuts. Who wouldn't get bored and start browsing around the frame? That's where the magic happens.

A good extra chameleons about the stage. They do not look directly in the camera lens the instant they would be in frame nor do they, as many an online listicle points out, flip off the camera eye like the man sitting behind the two in the transition to auditorium does. For what it's worth, the movie they've gone to see within this movie is *Barry Lyndon*, which their class voted to drop and these two have decided to finish together. Painfully twee. It's the man waving that's the real bright spot.

Once one notices the birdflipping fourth wall break they know to look out for more sanctimonious Washington state citizens going into business for themselves. *Diesel Power* is stuffed to the brim with rogue extras. A student in a classroom scene is clearly writing HI MOM in her notebook. Ext. soccer field – day, what is actually supposed to be a mildly intense “friendship over” scene, one boy just absolutely beams the other in the face with a football. Early on, in the cafeteria, a boy can be seen finishing off a milk jug and then taking a bite out of the carton Willy Wonka style. As the students walk the podium

in the penultimate graduation scene, a nameless cap n' gown does the jerkoff motion with his hand. It's to the point the viewer keeping score has to wonder why this is so frequent. How did these extras come to wanna out-do one another in the impromptu sport of semi-competitive frame ruining?

People used to respect the arts.

A VICE article from 2014 or 2015 would track down and interview some of the extras from *Diesel Power* in what was primarily a retrospective on the bizarre filmbombing phenomenon. Question number one for all subjects was obviously *why?* Their answers vary from wanting to make their friends laugh, not taking it too seriously since principal photography would just happen to be going on in the middle of their errands, and so on. The major one seems to be that nobody stopped them. Milk carton boy, real name Tony Palomino, was also in the movie theater scene and points to the guy flipping the bird as patient zero. Tony wanted to do him one better, the story spread around, next thing you know it was endemic. By them independently/collectively doing this, and by every step of the filmmaking process thereafter not accounting for this, they do in a twist of irony give the movie something memorable it would otherwise not have. *What was that one movie where the people in the background were flipping off the camera and doing the jerk-off motion? Oh, oh, and the guy who's taking out his trash and just climbs inside his trash bin. What the fuck was going on with that movie?*

He still can't remember why that line about house shows stuck out to him.

. . .

Briefly, in the eighties, the theater taking up most of Wishkah's third floor was independently owned. As in, just barely predating the rise of the megaplex, when venture capitalists owning several movie theaters was semi-normal. Wishkah Cinemas, opening a decade after the mall and serving as its first major expansion, was brilliantly titled and hosted six auditori-

ums. This was more than enough for 1983 movie habits and meant Wishkah Cinemas had the breathing room to not always be showing current films. Premiering alongside the theater's grand opening was *Never Say Never Again*, *Risky Business*, and *Revenge of the Ninja*. In the other three auditoria were safe bet classics: *Casablanca*, *The Wizard of Oz*, and *Psycho*. A decent selection and also *Revenge of the Ninja*, this size was prodigious development on the part of whoever owned the place. By the end of the decade, dozen-screen ultraplexes were the done thing. Wishkah Cinemas was halfway there by design, only adding two more screens ever. What they should've spent that money on, Junior thinks, is better seats.

Which is better, he asks himself (biased focus group): long theaters or tall ones? Do we stretch the audience out a quarter mile to the point the losers in the back row need opera glasses? The IMAX screens up at the Pacific Science Center stack their guests to the ceiling. You need to bring a ladder to ascend or descend, row to row. Between the two Junior thinks he'd take the latter. Infamously, the seats at Wishkah Cinemas were never updated to the recliners now standard to every theater chain. The ones that start to squeak after a while and nobody ever fixes, ever.

Just things Junior thinks about as he prepares himself, disembarking the static escalator, to revisit this movie theater at its deathbed. Floor 4, unofficially, is damned to be the deadest of everything when the charges fire. Or would it be the stuff at the bottom? A whole lot's gonna be crashing down. What do they call it? Conglomerates? Bizarre chunks of stone made from the collapse of many tons of concrete, packing down tighter than any machine could make by design.

Just more things Junior thinks about as he looks up to the mural. Popcorn, several name brand candies one of which doesn't exist anymore, soda cups, a film camera one-sixty-eight, one-ninety-two, two-sixteen, two-forty. A history of film with a very narrow interest; The most popular film of every decade, made more embarrassing by the last one being *Shrek*—

that was an addition in the early aughts, accounting for the next three decades of film including *Pretty in Pink* (?) and *Pulp Fiction* (sure). One could point out how obvious an addition to the mural this is: the thin division in the decal sheet, the fact that these last three decade-defining movies were clearly done by a different artist. But why now? It's already going down, no sense kicking them.

This mural is not a Pink Elephant Car Wash spinner. It's not worth peeling off and preserving, hence it still being here, soon to be ripped to ribbons by several hundred thousand tons of shopping mall material. Junior will try to miss this mural but it's really, really hard.

If only because he can, he hops the box office. In its final years the theater had partially pivoted to self-service kiosks, one of which Junior watched explode. Local news stuff. They say *exploded* even though what actually happened is disappointingly less severe. Someone tried to buy tickets to... well it was 2017 when this happened so how about *The Dark Tower*—the kiosk lagged like the devil as it always did, and as the cogs inside started to spin like a ticket was about to be printed, smoke seeped from the panel lines. Sure, if the official term for that is “exploded” then let that be what goes down in the paperwork. Just understand that it disappoints normal people.

Stop and imagine what it'd be like to work the box office. A position seldom fantasized about in the same romance as working a video store or running the projectors. Movies themselves can't resist anything other than the narcoleptic pizzafaced teenager for their box office clerk. In reality it's long lines of moviegoers, sometimes past the queue and around the corner, none of which know for certain what the movie is called. Has to be frustrating if that's the thing to frustrate you. *Two for The Infinity Avengers*. *Five for Grateful Eight*. As if they'll walk into the wrong auditorium if you don't correct them. But don't you wanna? No? Just Junior? Is it for the best he never worked the box office?

To the left is a set of airlock doors, for some reason, fol-



lowed by what was in the early eighties an impressive lobby. Begs bougier words like *foyer*. Architecture like this is why going to the movies is such an event to a kid. Forget baroque theater livery of a century ago, just make the ceilings really high. So high your voice bounces back to your ears before you know you've said something. In blue and gold and just as many mirrors as the rest of the mall, the lobby is a kaleidoscope of vibrant red LED marquees and the bassy earthquakes of trailers played on loop.

Or that's how it was.

Exactly one time in his life, Junior left a movie when the lobby was closed for the night. Like walking in on someone changing clothes. When the TVs are off and the marquees are reset it's just wrong. We aren't supposed to see them like this. When they've taken off their face for the night.

What Junior sees when he muscles the lobby doors open, fighting and winning against the air pressure, is magnitudes worse. Theaters are in bed with lights. Electric cities. Even the screens are lights. With everything off, everything, inside any further than this first step is an offense. How much more black could this be? Here the brain nursed on circuit boards searches frantically for something beeping, something plugged in for god's sake. The stale beep of a smoke detector. An exit sign. Fuck, a receipt printer? Plato's cave skipped a step. Can we start over?

Yes, the soda machines would be right *here*, and the condiment counter is over yonder. The concessions counter is clear on the other side, a flat edge jammed to a round corner. Without having been here so many times he'd be pawing at the dark. Come to think of it, where would the breaker box be?

Hopping the counters is still momentarily thrilling. He slides unnecessarily across the glass countertop, the buttons of his pants making an awful scratching noise on the temper. That, and the friction stalls his ass right at the edge. A very uncool slide, and yes this still matters to Junior even though he's alone.

Through the door behind the concessions stand he finds things can get even blacker than the lobby. His flashlight makes looking around even scarier. Funny how that happens. Clear at the other end of this room is a greenblack growth with edges sharp enough to make a shadow, with a front case Junior finds was left unlocked. Behind the gate's a ribcage of black switches. If the first half Junior flicks all at once do anything it's not in the lobby. Second column, fifth row, taps the podium and conducts every light in the ceiling to click on. He'd never heard the buzz before.

Getting back out, Junior sees a body on the floor and says "Otto?" before it's obvious this isn't Otto. Wishful thinking.

This guy's taller than Otto, enough for that to be obvious lying down. Sweatpants and a flannel shirt buttoned to the neck. He turns, slothlike, and rest his head on the arm that falls perpendicular. Looking up in the pose actors do when they get pretend-shot, he waves.

"You're new," he says.

"Are you okay?" is what Junior thinks to ask first.

"Ehh, you know how it is," he answers, wiping sleep from their eyes. Junior doesn't really know how it is. "Is it time already?"

"Yes, it's time." He checks the clock on his phone. "Three hours? Two and a half?"

"I'll be just fine. Don't you worry about me."

"Who are you?" Junior asks. If he gets another non-answer or riddle he's gonna lose it, he thinks. This seems like a safe place to try out losing it.

"Where to start..." he starts. "My name's Ethan. Ethan uh... just Ethan's fine. To get us going."

"I'm with the demolition team, we're checking the charges right now but the building's going—"

“Down, I know. One seventeen?”

“One o’clock even.”

Ethan scoffs. “We can make a bet if you want.”

Bet on what? “We have to get everyone out of the building,” Junior feels stupid for saying. “Will you be out of here by one?”

“Out of the building,” Ethan repeats. “It’s not that easy, leaving this place. But you don’t need me to tell you.”

“Uh...” Junior is spitting, “I’m just working a job. Working a gig. Really I haven’t been here in years.”

“Don’t lie. It doesn’t get you anything.”

Nervous about trying another slide, Junior carefully navigates back around the concessions stand. “I’m sorry,” he says, earnestly this time, “I don’t recognize you. Do we know each other from something?”

Ethan makes a show of sitting up, stretching out his lower back and forcing his arms up and out like a cat. He stays seated on the floor but looks over his shoulder. “I won’t say we don’t, in case we did. You need to be real selective with the faces you recognize, when you’ve been around as long as me. Faces take up a lot of space. But I’ll give you this: when I see the vest, I know it’s over.”

Junior forgot he was wearing the vest. “It’s cool to see the theater again, one more time,” he admits.

“Who do you have to blow around here to only do something one more time,” Ethan makes himself cough laughing. “You’re living the easy life. *One more time, one last time.* A guy can dream.”

“Did you come here to see the theater?”

“Just the theater? No, no, I don’t think so. Something in the theater, rather. It’ll come back to me if you give me a second.”

With a dull flop, two armfuls of laundry hitting the floor, Ethan falls on his back, arms splayed. Lifting up just a hand, he traces the ceiling. Tiles of black drywall mud he seems to mull over like a topographical map. “Got it!” he shouts, sitting back up.

“The arcade is down—”

“Do not interrupt me,” Ethan pleads, a hand out. “I’ll lose it.”

Beat.

“Aw, fuck’s sake,” Ethan sighs, falling back down. Pointer finger raised. Trace the ceiling. Sit back up again. “It’s back. Spring 1995. I live further north but I came down here—”

“*Diesel Power!*” Junior finishes.

“What did I just say about interrupting me?”

“Sorry.”

“1995, spring, the movie... got it got it got it—in the lobby, when the movie was about to come out, they had a contest. Right out here where I’m sitting. Remember?”

Junior waits a second in case this is rhetorical. “I wasn’t alive in 1995.”

“Oh, Christ, never tell me something like that again. But the contest. Prize was a 1984 Nissan Largo. Grand saloon. Panorama roof. Brand-new, zero miles.”

“Like the van from the movie.”

“Was it?”

“I don’t know why it would be any other van.”

“Then it would of have to have been. God. It’s a beautiful machine. And an import! Can’t get that shit over here, not new. Best part? Winner got it for free.”

Goes without saying, Junior thinks, but better not interrupt

this guy again.

“Contest was...” Ethan starts, dropping back down to do his tracing ritual again. “Contest was... you did something to get this Largo, Christ, what the hell—”

“Hand on the car!”

“Again, with the interrupting—”

“You put a hand on the car and had to stand there, whoever can do it the longest wins. That was the contest, wasn’t it?”

Ethan’s lips retrace what Junior just said. His eyes surrender some truth to this, looking down the middle distance. “My wrists are tender, now that you mention it.”

“When Diesel Power premiered in 1995, this is where they gave away the van. Wishkah wasn’t where they premiered the movie, but that’s where they held the contest. My seventh-grade science teacher was a participant. Do you remember someone named Bill? Bill Glasgow?”

“Bill... fucking Glasgow,” Ethan nods. The breakthrough makes him smile. He was an ‘on the knees, two hands on the bumper’ guy. Wanted the van because he just—”

“He had just had a kid.”

“Bill told you all of this?”

“Do you remember the whole deal with that movie?” He sits down parallel to Ethan, crisscrossed. “With the extras? Growing up, I knew a lot of adults who were in that movie. Mr. Glasgow was one of them—he’s in the theater scene.”

“Wanna know something funny?” Ethan grins.

“You were in it, too?”

“I was in...” back to the floor. Finger. Ceiling. Back up. “Diner scene. Booth on the left.”

“You...” Junior points, excited, “shovel mashed potatoes in your mouth but never swallow.”

“Everyone had their little joke with that movie” Ethan looks proud. “Can you believe they let us do that?”

“They let you?”

“*Literally*, no. It just happened. Nothing against the movie. Honest. Just an easy production to fuck with.”

“Professional extras down in Hollywood wouldn’t do that.”

“True,” Ethan grants, “but bet you they would if they could. It was us who was living the dream.”

“Would do what? Ruin all the scenes?”

“*Act*, my man. When you’re watching a movie, and you look beyond the pretty actors in front, out to the back like... give me an example.”

“A guy drinking coffee.”

“Okay but when you *see* the guy drinking coffee, what is the extra *doing*, exactly?”

“Filling out the space. Making the scene look more natural.”

“Wrong. Wrong. Totally wrong. In the utilitarian sense, sure. That’s what the choreographer wants them to do. But that guy is an actor, dude. He’s playing a character. In his head, God, that guy is agonizing over every movement. Right? He looks down at the coffee, tries to give it a look. He’s saying *shit, man, this day’s going to the pits. I’m about to get fired from my job or something but the monotony of drinking this coffee reflects my... goddamn... ah, I lost the thread. But I promise you that’s what he’s doing.*”

“And your character in *Diesel Power* can’t swallow his food.”

“Diesel Power is my proof, dude. We made that movie a different movie. A movie worth watching, if we’re being serious. What would that piece of shit be without us? Another weepy self-righteous whofuckingcares about teenagers and

their problems. Now it's art. It's teenagers and their problems, and right outside their peripheral vision is a world where nothing makes sense. It's a..."

The ceiling may not help him with this one.

"A reality rebelling against itself," Junior finishes.

"A little up its own ass but sure," Ethan smiles. "For the first time extras were the star. I had more eyes on me than Paul Rudd. Ain't one extra in the biz who wouldn't trade that gig for the spotlight."

It's very true to Junior. He hadn't thought of it like that.

"You came back here to reminisce," he says.

"Uh..." Ethan says from the side of his mouth, "I think so?" He does his ceiling ritual again. "Me being here makes sense. I don't know how to put it."

"Can I ask what you're doing when you lie down like that?"

Ethan thinks about it, popping an air bubble. "How do you spell bologna?"

Shit. Baloney sounds wrong. *"I love to eat it every day and if you ask me why I'll say Oscar Mayer has a way with B-O-L-O-G-N-A."*

Ethan throws his hands up like he just solved the case. "I've got this whole ceiling memorized. Every groove, every bump. No joke. It's a good place to offload memories. Put 'em on the hard drive. This one right here:"

It's actually impossible to know what part of the ceiling Ethan is pointing at as he draws a line in the air.

"Yup," he says, "first time I kissed with tongue I was seventeen. Name was Ashley. I don't need to know that all the time, so it's up there."

"Why is that not worth remembering?" Junior asks. What he would give to have something similar.

“You’re gonna have to get economic with your memories, dude. What’s your name?”

“Junior.”

“And what’s something really important to you, Junior? Something you would never wanna forget?”

Junior mulls it over. “Prom.”

“I don’t need to know the details. Lie down, look up, pick a spot. Something you’d recognize every time.”

Hmm. Slinking down to his back, Junior weighs his options. There is a particularly notable canyon near the middle row of lights. Snakes one way and back the other like a cut you’d get from running through sharp branches. He picks this one.

“Okay, now trace it. Keep thinking about prom.”

He should’ve been more specific. It’s what happened before prom that sticks out. He was down by the Pantheon, actually, and momentarily he thinks doing this at the Pantheon would make more sense but he’s not gonna bring this up. On his way to that group of girls, his eyes set on the one whose always got the headphones, confidence in the form of a chugged can of NOS, he’s about to do something so un-Juniorlike he can hardly place himself in that image. He’s about to ask a girl to prom. And right as he rounds the corner and says something like *hey* or maybe *what’s up hey I was wondering*, someone or something caught him in the ankle. His face hit the tiles hard. Busted his nose open. So hard it knocked the promposal out of his head and into the pool of blood making glyphs as it drained around the granite panels. The girls had gotten up, offered him McDonald’s napkins and asked if he was okay more than once. He had decided now, of all times, to ask the girl to prom. Rescheduling this was apparently not an option at the time. And while she had to turn him down anyway, it was nice to have someone worrying about him.

“Okay, I think I did it,” he says.



"Y'know what I just remembered?" Ethan says, dropping his hand. "Forget who told me this, but... down the hall, on the right, custodial closet, through the other door, manager's office. On the desk. Someone with a vest always seems to need something there."

Junior shoots up to his feet. "The swipecard?"

"The what?"

"For the basement. The cards."

Ethan finds a smile on his face and seems to fight it off. "Right. The basement. You haven't been, have you?"

"Nope. I'm going down before—"

"Wouldn't do you any good to lie to me, Junior."

"I'm... not lying. I've never been."

Looking disappointed, Ethan says, "sure," and lies down.

. . .

Every auditorium, every projector's booth, every door. Junior's scoured the entirety of Wishkah Cinemas twice over. Otto's not here. But the keycard is.

He knew he should've asked Ethan about Kiki Mauna Lewis or Planet 16. Too late now, now that Junior's ready to declare Otto somewhere other than the movie theater. Ethan's gotten up and left. The only indication he had ever been on the lobby floor is the distinct, human-shaped impression where he must have been laying for an unthinkable amount of time.

Otto will know. He *must*, that backwards-writing mute (he says this in a friendly way, like how pirates would talk about each other). And if he's not here, then he must've gone to the Super Sears first. And if he went to the Sears first, then he and Junior have two keycards each. They'll need each other.

Onward to Super Sears. Or where it had been, years ago.

The years have melted away. He barely thinks about where

he needs to go, instead catching the flow from one escalator to another, skybridge to skybridge. But it's only the path, what's familiar.

Maybe it's the continued ticking down of the clock that's getting to him, or really being alone in the skeleton Wishkah for the first time, but an irrefutable cruelty of today hits him as he peeks inside what used to be the Lego store. It's over. Count down the hours, count down the minutes, but it's over. Were it just over for Junior, like it's been feeling all morning, that'd be one thing. For the hundreds of thousands of people who had ever spent a thin minute at Wishkah in the past forty years or made one of its few hundred stores their first job or made one of its couple dozen attractions their first date, it's over. Pack it up. The ecosystem is dead and the saddest thing is no one did anything wrong. We, the total we, worked and played and loved and hated and now we have to do all that somewhere else because this particular way of working and playing and loving and hating is over. Unduly cruel, to make something special but be done with it. How valuable could those years have really been if the final day is a husk, abandoned and marked—

Is that a Bath & Body Works?

He seems to recall googling what an oasis actually is. A biologically fertile area in an otherwise arid or hostile biome. You aren't wrong to imagine a little pond surrounded by short spiky shrubs flanked by two palm trees (the hammock might be a bit much). Why this happens escapes him, but it must be something to do with underground reservoirs. Where does Bath & Body Works feature? Nowhere. Junior was just trying to draw a parallel. But anyone who's seen a Bath & Body Works knows there's something going on inside cousin to phenomena.

In the few hours he's been navigating Wishkah's beached corpse, navigating by LED light and where the beating sun outside finds gaps to slither inside, an appealingly lit and fully stocked Bath & Body Works is an ironically tough place to get the eyes open. Something like the opposite of the deep cave.

The eyes never adjust no matter how long you wait. He presses inside, past the little tables and jutting shelves and all the other shit they put right at the front. We'd be fucked if we needed to get out of here in a hurry but it does make the store look positively *stocked*. With one hand just above his eyes and another feeling around, his fingers brush through something crusty but slightly wet when pressured. An old hand lotion sample, probably. He's taken these freebies before, but his mind first goes to school-sponsored Halloween parties. Just inside this tiny wrist sized black hole is loose *brains* (spaghetti) and *guts* (watermelon) and *witches hair* (also spaghetti).

Something too universal to find at the source is tickling his ears. Music. He stands still to listen even though he's always been bad identifying which artist is which. This sounds to be, faintly, Aly & AJ? That's what he'll go with. A rare case of Bath & Body Works bias, where the individual is presupposed to artists that sound like they'd get airplay from women's toilet-ry chains. But sure, it could also be Anthrax.

If the lights are on and all the charcoal cucumber face scrubs are present and accounted for, sure, why not also keep the potential breakup songs bumping. Speakers are loyal soldiers. They will play and play and continue to play until ordered otherwise. Are those stories about soldiers stationed on remote islands true? The ones who never hear about the treaties and stay fighting the good fight into their eighties? You know what they say: you're not winnin' till you're winnin'.

Junior hates to personify electronics and appliances but he is roughly *Brave Little Toaster* aged. He hopes these speakers die knowing their last patron wasn't too long ago. For a second, and he only has some embarrassment acknowledging this, he scans the ceiling for where they might be. While he doesn't find them he also doesn't know what he would've done if he did. Give a salute?

His hands grope for a keepsake. He thinks of the hand sanitizers. He hasn't seen one in years but then again he has not

recently looked at any teenage girls backpacks. But he remembers. The little trapezoid bottles and the rubber clips. He squints at the two he rolls in his palm. Hand gel. There's the terminology. What do we have here? *Orange Nectar Blossom* and *Apple Cinnamon Rose*. Always seemed to be a combination of three things like a predetermined Panda Express. Always seems like one of those ingredients shouldn't be there. What's rose adding to apple cinnamon, exactly? Well, when Junior opens his own soap and fragrance chain strong enough to outlast the human race *then* he can call the shots. Until then... what's that smell?

A foolish question for a Bath & Body Works. Might as well ask for a particular blade of grass. But Junior shouldn't need to tell any once or repeat customer that some smells stand out amongst the wash of citrus and mint gels. Where is his nose going? Somewhere in the radius of the Pocketbacs. Something too special to only be a combination of three nonsense components. He considers this like finding the source is a matter of efficient deduction but in reality what he's doing is opening up every unique Pocketbac and pulling a whiff. But he's right.

Pure Paradise. This is the one. Evidently too special to relegate to just one body wash SKU. The special names must be when the scientists at Bath & Body Works concoct something obviously special but not so easily identifiable. Evocative fragrances—not just *apple*. Pure Paradise means something, and while he can't say for sure where he remembers this from, he won't leave it behind. Not when the memory's been so considerably bottled up for him.

With two Pure Paradise Pocketbacs filling his back left, he bids the remarkably living Bath & Body Works farewell. Just before doing so, however, he wonders if this constitutes shoplifting. Like, Bath & Body Works is still a thing, right? If the music's on, surely the security team operating remote out of Quantico just saw him leave without paying is... how much do these little hand gels cost? Can't be more than five bucks. He crosses back to the counter and drops his Planet 16 winnings for whoever's job it still is to run this place. Then he leaves.

Even when he was outside going in, Wishkah never felt so dark.

. . .

Finding the anchors in Wishkah is a matter of time, not accuracy. Take the big loop and you'll see the four titanic facades before you see the same one twice. Wishkah's loop was famous, if you wanna be generous with the word. In the cozy and only sometimes hostile community of Mall Walkers, the Wishkah loop was a significant notch on the belt (feather in the cap? Tick on the board?), justifying the trip over for some (old) people. Now there's a type of person that will cease to exist in a way other than dying. Mall Walking was a thing *and it's rude to mock people's interests, like come on, they're not hurting anyone*. Makes enough sense if you're a walker and happen to live in the state where the joke on sitcoms is always rain. Can we interest you in a massive, completely indoor complex with enough straight flat walkways to reach the moon and back? How about one with a twenty-four hour security presence? How about one with walk-up pretzels? Bless the guy who figured out most anything that involves movement is exercise. Put him or her in the Hall of Fame. You'd be surprised how many things have those.

It was rare for Junior to see the Wishkah Mall Walkers in person, but that's a presence beyond direct exposure. They had *signs*. Sure, you could just draw the widest perimeter possible—coming out to a little under a full mile—but the more journeyed Mall Walkers had devised a maximized route that seemed to be the standard. Here or there an ignorant shopper may have seen directional signs at skybridges and forks telling Mall Walkers in the know where and how to optimize their workout. Whoever plotted this out got the final length to three miles on the money. Beautiful mathematics at play, here.

Wishkah management, a few times if Junior has it right, organized sponsored mall walks. Outstanding move on their part. Sounds like an activity and an achievement. *I've been to every*

*corner of the biggest mall in the tristate area with no serious competition. Yeah, that's right. Peep the bumper sticker.* Surely the real goal was getting people inside the stores but Wishkah always found ways of making money back on size alone. For five years (six?) there was a marathon that included a segment through the first floor. Really the only remarkable part of that marathon, says Junior, someone who has never ran a marathon.

Those Mall Walker routes made a meal of the anchors. All three floors where it was permitted. Apparently JCPenney put the cruelest of kiboshes on their loiterous walking. A couple years into the practice, too. Reason 212 they went out of business.

JCPenney, Sears, Circuit City, Macys, Target, Walmart, Whole Foods, a prototype Amazon-branded department store active for one year, Woolworths, and Nordstrom. Every one of these retail alphas called itself a Wishkah anchor at one point or another. On Wishkah's final day, only JCPenney held the title for dear life. But the second to last was Sears.

Sears was always on the Mall Walkers side, thankfully. They had to be. Going back twenty-four years, even, Sears was aching for some foot traffic. Someone on the board was smelling burnt toast—just look at Wishkah's *Super Sears*.

See, one would think any chain opening an extravagant dick-swinging superstore is doing pretty well but what you should be doing is checking the CO detectors. Turns out, looking through the history of superstores as Junior did one night when he should've been sleeping, that's a sign of bad, bad times. Corporate peacocking, yeah, that sounds smart. At the time Wishkah getting a Super Sears was a mutually beneficial affair. Sears is, subconsciously to the outsider, so essential to the Wishkah ecosystem they'd get the largest retail space available; so big it was custom built for the tenant. Likewise Mr. Sears chose Wishkah, of all shopping centers, as promised land for the world's first (only) megaultrastore. For exactly two months it was the largest department store in America by square foot-

age. Had to be square footage. A cloying statistic. Less impressive than verticality. Junior would be ashamed to bring it up.

Open wide over all three floors like the unhinged jaw of a python, Super Sears was too big for its now demolished signage to fully fade away. Forgive Junior calling it the wrong name. Sears S was what the sign used to say, in bold white to contrast with the normal logo's wafer cookie splits. Accentuate how stuffed with product Sears S is compared to the normal, already pretty big Sears? Junior's sure they did their market research. Just not enough to predict the local insistence on Super Sears.

Super Sears closed years ago. When Wishkah management couldn't court another tenant for the four floor behemoth, they boxed up the entrances and prayed everyone forgot. But not even the wall behind the sign has forgotten.

Boarded up with wood paneling and eventually spackled drywall, it seems the only way to get inside would be an auxiliary entrance. An employee exclusive shaft. Those being the rules for people who don't have spanners and have time to space.

His first throw merely glints off the drywall. As he walks over to pick up his tool he thinks to run into the wall linebacker style. Boys will punch holes in this stuff when they lose a game of Counter-Strike. Surely it can't be hard.

. . .

It's not hard but it does hurt.

Junior's used to the dark. To be walking around this place alone, he has to be. But what he's just tumbled into after breaking the drywall shell defies his perception of what The Dark means.

A glutenous atmosphere stretches to the border of his vision, eating away at the residual light with every step forward. No matter how minor. It grows even when he stands still. The flashlight on his phone seems to stop dead at the twilight zone.

JCPenney left behind enough glass that white light would catch and hold in the panes. Super Sears wasn't expecting anyone today and isn't ready to exist.

Bullheaded, brave in undue magnitudes, Junior persists. It may have just been him but he might've seen the bobbing of a flashlight on the second floor. Right to left then back the other way, an Angler in open black water. How common is white ambience? Too office park for Junior's comfort. Unnatural. Humans made yellow light a bajillion years ago. His free hand goes to his pocket, first out of fear but finding a duo of hard-won keycards sliding back and forth, scratching on some hard particles sandwiched between the plastic. Turning back now because something's a little spooky would be the greatest waste. What is he here to do if not rage against the dying of the light.

What's five feet in front of Junior hasn't happened yet. In the scant iris of white LED he can see his Timberlands, the pale and sometimes blue tiling of the Super Sears floor (the only familiar thing whose comfort is now amplified), and zilch. You'd have to know how Sears did their floors to know you were anywhere but the Underworld, and even then you'd have to know how specifically Super Sears or Sears S did their floors and who the fuck knows that.

Junior stops to listen for a sound and picks up on the rush of blood through his own head. More viscous than he imagined. A toilets singing that never ends.

Against this suffocating quiet, Junior is taking bigger steps. Godzilla on the playground. It's not until the first wall he realizes he's doing this. His mind had been occupied with repainting the Super Sears floor plan. Appliances and electronics were upstairs. It's all he was ever interested in on those rare trips his family would take to what is in practice just too big a store. IKEA without the exotic esoterism of exploring an infinite library and its self-generating bedrooms. He was too young and boyish to care about clothes, which was most of the first floor



and most of his family's time. Figures he'd be adrift. In fact, why start here, he wonders. Entering from the second floor would be more in line with his memories of the place and there's an escalator, like, right there.

He turns what he's pretty confident was a clean 180 degrees. Dance instructors would be proud. But considerate as he is to following the seam in the tiles, he finds himself at another wall. He glides his hand to the right, further than seems plausible, then to the left, and all he gets is a tingling smoothness to the skin and his heart in his throat.

No acting a bitch. Junior had his whole childhood to be a bitch, which he regrets to think he mostly was (horror movies, being outside at night, the haunted house the neighbors would build out of their garage for Halloween) but he's got power and a spanner and—oh, yeah, he has a lighter.

For just a few tries, a total blackness he didn't know was possible. Coronas pulsate in the dark, the kind he only sees when he rubs his eyes, which for lack of anything to observe have made up their own subject. Snapping the Zippo open, he tries rolling the flint or whatever that wheel is made of. He know you gotta do it fast but that's it. Should he take the uncomfortable burn of his thumb as him doing something wrong? Pressing down as hard as he can produces a spark that only scares him because he doesn't know if those little gnats are enough to burn. One—two—

*Fwoooooom*; the Zippo's arabesque is larger than Junior's seen in the movies but lights up the floor in a wider radius than his phone. So much so he can now see where tiled walkways end and carpet begins. A more comforting position than his flashlight. Man made fire and was dominion over the beasts of the field. Or something.

How about some music?

These things are always better managed with stuffed senses. Walking home at night was better with talking in his ears and

light over his shoes. And the data reception in purgatory is pretty good, actually. Should pick something he likes but could stand by in the event someone else, south or north, happens to be in here. Everyone likes Run DMC, right?

Naught ten seconds into *Peter Piper* and God comes stomping down. Up above Junior's head, beyond the chimney of interweaving escalators and stairs and partially cut off by the border of a fourth floor walkway, and light comes on. And off. And on. And off. And off and on and off and on and off and on, strobing aggressively but never to the point of mechanical rhythm. Milliseconds that Junior feels rather than observes directly. Someone is flicking the lights, purposefully, Morse code style. What a time to not know Morse code but Junior's not convinced that's what's going on. He wonders...

When he switches songs, from Run DMC to Jim Croce (it was in the playlist), the lights turn off. Must be listening. Judging. Jim needs a minute but by the time *I carry it with me like my daddy did*, the flickering strikes up again. He's being tested.

Junior pauses the music and the light shuts off. Zippo aloft in one hand (it's pretty hot) and his phone in the other, he thinks through the reactions. Run DMC was a no-go and Jim Croce lasted just marginally longer. Is this a matter of taste? Is he supposed to be guesses what kind of music Sears is into? How is anyone supposed to know that? Puzzles need clues. Okay, so, Sears. The department store institution. Of all the tunes in all the lands, it stands to reason high-capacity retail would favor the lowest common denominator for their background fluff. In the olden days this was called Muzak and came on discs normal people couldn't just buy. Fat chance any of that stuff is streaming even if Junior knew what to look up. How about Pop?

Before Junior can agonize over what qualifies as Pop he's landed on Toto's *Africa*. Safe bet. The safest of bets. What sorta schmuck would pick Run DMC, right guys, hahahahaha—

The light is flickering again. Painful to look at directly and Junior only does so he can identify where exactly it's coming from. Looks to be, if the edges can be trusted, an office. A jailor's tower with a view of the whole store—back when there was something to look at. And it's angry. The nerve of Junior to think this schlock would get airtime in a sophisticated haberdasher like Super Sears. Well, excuse him. Y'know, panopticon, this is just the sort of persnickety choosiness that sends department retailers to the shadow realm. But you would already know all about that, wouldn't you?

Madonna?

Okay, be like that.

Junior sits, crisscrossed, balancing the red hot Zippo on its base. The light has shrunk in these past few minutes. He can't remember which lighter prides itself on never burning out, if any would be so bold. That said he thinks he may be running out of time. Sears, Sears, department stores, shopping with his family, shopping with his mom, accompanying his mom to Super Sears because what are they gonna let a second grader be home alone, it's crowded, someone is yelling at him for hiding in the racks, it's crowded, he hates crowds, he hates losing his mom in the crush, something off and away is warm, everything will be alright, nothing bad happens this time of year, with... with every Christmas card I write. May your days be merry and bright. And may all your Christmases be white. String section like a creaky elevator.

Over a billion people have streamed Bing Crosby's White Christmas. Good. He probably deserves the crown, within the dangerous niche of Christmas music. Makes or breaks artistic clout. A staple of the holidays and a fat royalty check once a year or an obnoxious death by crooning you'll never live down. If Bing's got one fan, it's that light.

Barely two seconds into White Christmas, the light smashes on and stays on. As the bulb warms up, Junior can just make out the outline of the escalators.

. . .

Super Sears is the only Wishkah anchor with four floors. The rest got three—dwarfing every other store as anchors should, but still so typical. What Super Sears got out of that extra floor, despite it not being accessible to the public, Junior's about to find out.

Inviting himself through the employees-only double doors and up the first flight of stairs to his right, two walls and a ceiling all observable at the same time have never been so sweet. Confidence-boosting architecture, continuing lack of light be damned. He switched back to the light on his phone when the analog torch in his hand was too painful to hold. The Zippo radiates inside his pocket, wafting an uncomfortable heat down his leg.

At the top of the stairs, Junior is greeted by a snaking of those same condensed halls. The fourth floor does not have the same wide open emptiness as the rest of Super Sears. Thankfully so. Somehow the labyrinth accented by the distinct humming of *White Christmas* is less creepy.

That, and the layout is familiar. Not because he's *been* here but because there's only so many ways Big Retail cares to corral its employees. He's seen it already, when he worked the backroom at Best Buy instead of going to college. Market tested friendliness flies south for the winter, where it concerns the ground troops. You're lucky to get windows to compliment your grocery store sushi lunch. We wouldn't want customers to spy the employees when they're naked, as in the give or take thirty minutes when their helpful disposition is switched off.

Something about Sears doing the same thing for their workers is sadder than Best Buy's. Don't ask Junior how. If he was seriously pressed on the matter he thinks he'd say Best Buy benefits from being a more specialized merchant. One can say they work in tech and not be totally wrong. What's your job when you work at Sears? Traveling merchant? Tending to the bazaar?

That light he had seen out on the floor definitely came from an office. At a fork in the halls, Junior has a window on his left and the short zigzag to a set of double doors on his right. The window looks out to that same darker than dark he was shockingly okay with standing inside just a few minutes ago, but with the intense radiation of light tubes frying just out of view. He's close. Please report to the big guy upstairs.

Should he knock? Maybe he should knock. Double doors endanger knocking. Must be why big bosses the world over insist on them.

*Dum-dumdumdum-dum.*

He's waiting for a *dum-dum*, like that's how people answer the door. Stupid.

Gently, he muscles down the handle, meditating on the air pressure fighting against him. Smells old. This wind thinks things were better under Reagan.

"Hello?" he says, opening the door slightly wider so he can fit his helmet inside the head poke.

Why was he expecting large oaken bookshelves and an exotic rug? Actually, why was he more or less imagining Mr. Burns' office? Store managers are never so pampered by the suits. Everyone knows that, but really? Can't butter up the top guy at this, the *Super* Sears? Yeah, it's not actually called that but Junior is stalling for time because something else about this office is scaring him.

Floor to ceiling, the walls are tattooed in graphite. Charts, notes, bullet points, question marks, scratched out notes and projections everywhere there's a smidge of canvas. And the papers. In place of that rug Junior was imagining is the egalitarian scatter of lined paper and graph paper and blank 8.5 x 11s. Some have more scratch than others but this doesn't just happen. *Oopsie, time got away from me but I really should tidy up*

*around here.* Nah. This guy is crazy.

“Bing’s from the East side,” a man from behind the door says too casually. “Did you know?”

Junior slides the righthand door open a little wider. Out by the window is a big wide Oval Office desk. He used to know what that thing was called. It’s got a special name. Anyway, this desk is similarly mummified, with the distinction of some papers being actively written on by a professionally dressed man with an unprofessional, deflated haircut.

“Spokane,” Junior says. “I’m aware.”

“He was born in Tacoma if we wanna be anal about things but Spokane was his home. Good friend of mine,” he stands up, turning to the window, “called Dennis Rosenblum II operated a Sears on the East side for *twenty-four* years. He had started out in the fulfillment centers. Just goes to show...”

“Were you flickering the lights?”

He nods in the reflection. “The intercom breaks in 2018. I’m all the way up here and, in better times, my staff are all the way down there. I had the department heads learn a bit of Morse in 2006—you know, I served before going to college. Convenient when I had department heads, but... can’t expect normal folk to know these things. Hence the flickering. Worked though, am I right?”

Is he?

“Are you... another one of those people that still hang around here?”

“How do you mean?”

“I’ve been all over the mall, I’m with the demolition—”

“Oh, I’m aware.”

“—and I’ve met a few, I dunno, *interesting* people. Do you know Ethan?”

“Ethan Bradley?”

“Maybe?” Junior genuinely can’t remember if Ethan gave a last name. “He’s in the movie theater.”

“Sad to say I don’t leave my post very often,” the man scratches his hair, patting the lick down. “You can see I have a lot of work to do, and if I get too far away it’s... *tough*, trying to recall where I had left off. What am I saying, though, you know this sad man’s song and dance.”

“No, not really. I’m new.”

The man freezes. He and Junior lock eyes off the window. “New?”

“Well—” Junior stammers. He’s not sure where in the lie he should start. “See I’m from the north crew, but I’m filling in for the south. We’re doing a final sweep before—”

“Before Doomsday. Indeed. I’m aware. You don’t need to hurt yourself, worrying about me.” He pivots on a foot, pointing at Junior like he’d point at a chart. “Interesting, however, you would call yourself new. That’s the *only* part of this that’s new.”

“What?”

“Are you working with a kid named Otto?”

Oh, shit. “You know Otto? Is he here? Or *was* he here? I’ve been looking for him.”

“Likewise, he must be looking for you. And if nothing else going on is new, then you’re both looking for this.”

On his inside breast pocket, the man slides out a thin plastic card, colored in what could only be called Sears blue.

“Yeah!” Junior blurts, excited. “The last one! So you know about the basement?!”

“Inside voices, please, this is a place of business.”

“Sorry, sorry, just... we’re running out of time.”

“Running out of time...” the man repeats. “So you really are new. Name’s Ritchie. I’d ask for Mr. Lewis-Sydney, but, what’s the use.” Ritchie makes himself laugh, turning back to the black window with arms stretched. “*King of what?*”

“You ran the Super Sears,” Junior confirms.

“*Sears S*, but... yeah, you’re not the first,” Ritchie hand-waves away. “It wasn’t my place to question the marketers. You know. Store operator. Above my head. I couldn’t tell you where Super Sears came from, but then again I couldn’t tell you what that S is supposed to stand for.”

“Yeah, I used to come here when I was a kid. Around—”

“Around Christmas,” Ritchie finishes again. “Who didn’t? Sears had that *exalted* catalog—every bit of your holiday shopping without ever leaving the house. But! If you did... you know we paid out the hoo-ha for the most impressive holiday decorations in the business. Industry leaders. Macys ripped us off!”

Sorry to—” Junior stops him. “Sorry. Do you know what’s in the basement?”

He’s a suit of armor held together with tape, Ritchie. With just the word *basement* there’s a distinct flicker in his eye. An emotionality yearning to explode free from his nice suit jacket.

“Downstairs, you mean,” Ritchie says. Probably stalling. “With the cards.”

“It’s just everyone’s been so cagey with me. Either they don’t know or don’t remember or... Ethan thought I might regret looking.”

“Ethan Bradley?”

“Do you know or do you not know what is in the fucking basement.”

Felt good to say. A little intense, Junior knows, but it’s so rare he’s both frustrated and ready to let a stranger know. For



that card he's putting his foot down.

Sighing, Ritchie drops to his chair, running a hand through his hair and messing it up again.

"I understand how this could be so irritating," he starts, "to someone in your circumstance. Otto lost his cool just the same. Worse than you, if you can believe it. Yes, I know what's down there and I know why some people who *did* know would have stopped knowing. What you need to understand, kid, what you need to be ready for, is chasing the straight answer this place does not have."

Junior blows out his nose. He really does hate being told he doesn't know something. Even if he seriously doesn't. He'd be happy to learn. He'd be happy to learn anything, experience *anything*. When was it that his generation left the nest to sleep in German hostels and move in with their girls and get Drunk and what could he have been doing at the time to miss the starting gun; that bus serving the newly adult to the halcyon place where innocent, emotionally diminutive kids are dragooned grown adults who have been places and done stuff. If he failed to visit New York or quit his shitty hometown job, is that it? He hung around the coop a smidge too long and now he's just fucked?

Oh, but he's supposed to be scared by the heat death of the universe. Look around you, Ritchie. He's on the self-guided tour of his own heat death. When Wishkah goes down, so does the last thing about growing up he still recognizes. While he was busy staying the same, everything changed. Every school's been torn down and put back up bigger, every road's been repaved, every restaurant is a different restaurant and every park went from woodchips to recycled sneakers. This is the end of the lightyear. He's been there. It's the only place he's been.

"How about an example?" Ritchie suggests, dropping his pen and clapping his hands together over the papers.

Oh, good. Junior was getting kinda dark there.

“Shoot.”

“When my Sears S opened up alongside Wishkah in ‘73, things already weren’t looking so good for this Golden Age department giant. Stores were closing, renovating to no effect, our contemporaries and rivals were locking up for good, the people were moving—pardon me if I vomit in my mouth—online. I can’t pretend to be... *ung!* —”

Did Ritchie actually vomit in his mouth? Best not ask.

“... I can’t pretend to be in the heads of my executives when they landed on Sears S but if you’ll pardon the poetry, I think what they wanted was the solution. It’s why they hired me. Immediately before I assumed my latest role, I had managed a Portland anchor from near-bankruptcy to regionwide profit records. In fact, if you’ll excuse the half-gloat, they were ready to move me out of the stores themselves and into an administrative role. Honored, really, I was, but I had to turn them down. It’s managing directly and intimately from right up here where I thrive. When the regional inspector visited the Portland anchor in ‘77 I was still working in an assistant manager capacity, and back then our roles were divided into multi-department chunks. Appliances, menswear, intimates...”

Oh. So this is gonna be a long story. Remains to be seen whether Ritchie’s point is gonna need this much context.

Lots to mull over, though. Apparently Otto’s a microcelebrity. Rubbing elbows with department store managers and adjacent mall phantoms. Before heading down to the basement (or maybe *on* the way down; it’s getting pretty close to detonation) Junior swears to getting some explanation out of that guy. Straight from his mouth. Or written in the notes app and held against a mirror. Whichever works out cleaner.

Come to think of it, when did Jack say Otto started working for the union? He had introduced Otto like they were already friends and had at least one story for what working with him is like. Question is, how would Ritchie know Otto, to the point of

expecting him here and now instead of Junior, if the crews doing the final sweep haven't been inside Wishkah until today? Why does he write backwards? And what's the *real* reason he doesn't talk?

Okay that last one might be too insensitive to ask. It'll stay in Junior's head.

"... around the same time I met Paul Allen and demoed an early version of Windows 2, simple enough that demo kiosks could run in our electronics department without an attendant. Customers could navigate the machine on their own. You have to understand, at the time, Windows only had this in common with the Macintosh. Computers, even personal computers, were not so easily picked up—"

Okay, looks like Ritchie's still doing this.

Otto knew Junior was good at Daytona USA before Junior knew it himself. How? And how did he know JCPenney stashed their keycard under a random portion of rug? Hardly somewhere people would naturally check. Actually, while Junior's at it: how many guys are working inside today? He'd counted himself as the twenty-third, Neil counted him as the twenty-third, but that doesn't add up. Junior is a replacement. Otto is completely unaccounted for.

Now Junior feels close to something. If Ritchie's mistaking the grin twisting on his face for interest in his career (the story has moved on to how 9/11 affected retail operations) what's the hurt in letting him be wrong. There's something fishy about Otto. Everything is suspect. The pot's calling the kettle black, sure, but that idiom isn't about how the pot was incorrect.

A strange sensation. He can't say he's ever looked forward to confrontation.

"... meeting I didn't look forward to attending. That being said, I was sitting on top of the last remaining 'unique' Sears, so I had a right to attend. To hit us between the eyes with it: Sears had entered its eleventh hour. Effectively, all remaining

stores not dissolved in our filing were set adrift.”

“Did you ever try pivoting to online sales?” Junior asks, feigning interest.

“Have you ever picked out your own coffin? Sure, it was suggested. Up to me? No, never. Completely against our values, *repulsively* so.”

“It’s just... were the catalogs not an early version of Amazon shopping?”

“Amazon? Pardon my French, but no. The Sears catalog sold your home; from 1908-1940 the Sears catalog *literally* sold your home, but figuratively did the same for a century. It’s the beautiful, important work we did that no one seems to remember. What do you *buy* on Amazon, anyway? Shitty, ill-conceived Christmas presents? Dress shirts made of paper? Department stores were—*are*—”

“Organs of the mall?”

“The mouth of the world!”

Gross. “How about heart of a community?”

“Better,” Ritchie snaps. “When Sears rose to power, nothing like it had been seen on *Earth*. Am I being hyperbolic? I don’t think so. Sears invented suburban shopping. Driving out to the city for your home goods? Not anymore. Plop a Sears right in the middle of suburbia and we... pumped the blood! Thank you for the ‘heart of a community’ line. Corny, but it’s true. Nothing before so viscerally expressed our wants as Americans except *maybe* the Statue of Liberty. An entire home for sale across three floors. Where else—do not say Ama—”

“Amazon?”

“—I was just gonna say. Picture this, if you can, coddled little boy; I can still see momma’s lipstick on your cheek. You just arrived in this country. You are the huddled masses. Haven’t even put your bags down yet. There’s no book, tells you

what the hell you're supposed to do. But there's a place you could start. Everything you would ever need, every... luxury you'd ever seen on TV. The stories you'd heard about America were real. Where else—this is what I was about to say a second ago—where else could you buy a home? Sears didn't sell appliances or belts or blue jeans or spatulas, kid, it sold people's *lives*. What, online shopping *replaced* that? No one buys their life online, they buy *junk*. No wonder we're never satisfied.

“Could never say the same for Sears customers! Not on our watch!”

He drinks from his thermos and finds it empty.

“And the solution was a bigger Sears,” Junior seriously wonders. It comes out snarkier than he meant.

Ritchie sticks out a finger like he's actually drinking something. “Sears always had a ceiling. One removed from our competitors—really we got along with our brothers and sisters at Hudson's, Woolworths. It was only ever competition. There was something missing from the... the *formula*. Call us doomed. Suppose you wouldn't be wrong. *Heh*. Mind you, Sears S isn't called that because it's the biggest; Chicago was the biggest.”

“I thought you said you don't know what the S stands for.”

“I know what *Sears* stands for. As an institution. What do we fight to protect, hm? When I enlisted, at your age, it was so my mother never had to worry. She'd never stand in a breadline on my watch. When I got back my motivation hadn't changed. I had just found a place where I could physically execute on that want.”

“Department store shopping.”

“You say that like it's bad. You know what people did when they saw a Sears for the first time? I'm talking about those huddled masses again. The people who *know* breadlines. Know what they do? Burst into tears. I saw third-worlders *weep* over

how low we've set the bar on luxury goods."

He's paused for effect.

"... And that's a good thing," Junior clarifies.

"Great thing!"

"And Amazon is bad for making that faster."

"... I see what you're trying to do here," Ritchie laughs off, turning his chair away. "Make me out to be the bitter old-timer. I'm the one who kept his hair, *Jeff*. Sure, I'll grant them convenience but I don't think it's unreasonable to suggest an intimacy is lost in clicking. Remembering being a kid? Shouldn't be hard. For you, that wasn't too long ago. You and Mommy were grocery shopping and she ran into a friend of hers?"

Oh god. "Hours."

"Felt like they talked for hours! Except, the thing is, how often are those two seeing each other? Modern life, it... *corrals* us around. You may be seeing your friends a lot these days but you just wait. Those little playdates are gonna separate themselves by four or five months once some little guys are in the picture. Point is, kid, we value direct interaction as a community. Something we lose entirely if we plug in permanently."

"I do miss running into people," Junior concedes.

"Am I right? Sears and our department brothers caught slack for killing the mom and pop, *oh boo hoo*, but what we brought in return is the community center—"

He's been saying community a lot.

"Do you know the Kiki Mauna Lewis? Over on the other side of the mall?"

"The what?" Ritchie's gone back to his papers. Inspiration seems to have struck him at an inopportune time for Junior, who's getting tired of entertaining these guys.

"A tiki bar. Over by the JCPenney."

“Can’t say I’ve spent a lot of time over by, you know, to be objective, our competitors. No, I’m not familiar.”

Interesting he says this. When Junior runs his boot along the carpet, Nassau grains spring up from the roots. “The girl running the place doesn’t remember what’s in the basement, but she’s kept the bar furnished and stocked. When I met her, she was wiping the tables down.”

“A respectable little worker bee you got there, but I’m not seeing what it’s got to do with me.”

“I’ve run into a couple of people who are still hanging around here, for some reason. Up to the day it’s gonna come down. Why are they staying? Why are you staying?”

“I could ask you the same thing.”

“But I’m not gonna stay.”

“Are you sure?”

Whatever that’s supposed to mean. “If I can’t understand what’s in the basement without seeing it myself, can you tell me why people who have seen the basement never leave?”

Ruminating, Ritchie chews the end of a pen. *Cli-click!* He scratches away the equation he’d be working on for, with how much of the page is occupies, hours. “Here’s what I’ve been up to. Between the day we closed and today. Remember that doomsday meeting I was telling you about?”

No. “Yeah.”

“The story we got. About shifts in the market. I didn’t buy it then and I don’t but it now, no siree. The Sears S project was an *admirable* attempt to claw back that Golden Age Sears appeal, but... even when this Herman Miller was fresh off the truck I sensed something was wrong. A desperation fueling a fruitless, terminal business venture. It was all wrong but I thought I could make it right. Do you know what’s keeping us from putting up tents on the moon? It’s not money, it’s time. Squirrel

away enough hours and sit me down in a Herman Miller and I'll tell you the answer was 43. I thought 'well, running the place is enough of a sink as it is, but bet you I could steer the ship true if all I had was the time to work things out.' That's what you're seeing right here, over there, under your boot—and hey, I'm still working on that one so try not to scuff the paper. Now the perspective doesn't escape me, kid, I saw that look on your face when you stepped in here. Solutions are messy. There's the long and short. But I'm close. You'll have to take my word but I'm telling you I've never been closer than I am right now—next times things will be different.”

“Closer to saving Sears. By yourself.”

“It's gonna—”

Exasperated, Ritchie drops his pen. Here Junior thought he was pressing down extra hard to squeeze out those last few drops of ink, but that's not how he's writing. He's pressing hard enough to etch wrinkles into the page. His equations are dictated in muscle.

Reaching back for his breast pocket, he slides out the keycard again. “It's gonna make sense,” he stresses. “Take this and come back when it does. Been a long time since somebody realized I was right.”

Christ, finally. Junior leans over the wide desk and snatches away the card before Ritchie thinks of another exciting Sears management story.

. . .

“Oh, y'know where Sim—oh hold up, I know who you are.”

Bad time to get stopped by somebody he doesn't know. Hands on his knees, Junior is doubled over sucking air. He's been booking it from Super Sears, the end of the south wing, back to the Pantheon. Ritchie hadn't seen Otto but was kind enough to tell Junior the way out: from the bottom of the escalator, turn ninety degrees to the right and just keep going.



Still with only natural light seeping in through the cracks, Wishkah is unbearably bright. Orders of magnitude worse than checking the phone in the morning, this. Whatever we're to call the light exposure equivalent of The Bends. It makes catching his breath harder, psychologically. Too many hunter-gatherer survival alarms tripped at once.

"Where's..." Junior swallows loud, "*Where's who?*"

"Simon. He's with y'all southerners."

"... *I don't... I don't know a Simon... sorry.*"

Wrong answer? This guy's wearing the north crew's cuts; that perplexing, deep blue. Is he one of Austin's friends—one of Austin's *boys*, excuse him?

"Really? I saw you with him at the arcade. When you sent that racing game."

If he can't bother to remember Daytona USA (it's named after a real thing!) Junior feels better about not remembering this guy's name, if he ever said what it was.

"Oh, uh... yeah... Simon," Junior half-lies. Is this guy talking about Danny? Shit, he might be talking about Danny. "We split up."

"Oops. Foreman's got gonna like that. Y'know we got, like, less than an hour left."

"What?!"

"Quarter after noon. Check your phone."

Dammit dammit dammit "Gotta go."

As he takes off again, the guy says "*when you see Simon tell him I want my fog machine back!*"

Unfortunately for that guy, Junior's not running off to find ~~Danny~~ Simon. Junior's going to the basement.

Who was the first kid to tell him the basement story, he thinks. A pervasive schoolyard fairy tale, that's his best sum-

mation. A story kids are obligated to bring up should Wishkah be the subject. Lego is coming to mind, for some reason. And Wishkah did have an impressive Lego store in its prime—oh yeah! First grade. Or was it second? Whichever year the Ultimate Collector's Millenium Falcon first released. The photos in the Lego catalog didn't look real. How could so much be one set? And there's an interior? And four minifigures fit inside the cockpit, like four people clearly can in the movies yet previous Lego Falcons continuously fell short on delivering? Of course, it was five-hundred dollars at retail and at the time Junior didn't believe a person could have that much money at once.

At the time he was fond of bringing magazines to school. Video games, toys, *that* was independent reading time instead of something valuable. He was showing the kid next to him something in the magazine, back when the opportunity cost of instigating conversation was practically nothing. The kid had him flip to page XYZ, said there was a new Montana Falcon, for a second Junior didn't know what the (heck) he was talking about, *oh you mean the Millenium Falcon, what's a millennium?*, he flipped to the correct page, and at this point a third kid leaned over and said he'd seen one at the mall last weekend. Which mall? Kids don't know which mall is which mall—whichever one his parents preferred. Then the kid said it was the mall that burned down a hundred years ago. Yeah, a hundred years ago there was this big fire and the whole mall burned down. The new mall is built on top of the old one. Montana Falcon said he's making that up but the kid said no, it's real, in fact his dad *said* it happened. What does a kid say then?

Wishkah burned down and they built the new Wishkah on top. Junior believed this story for years. Until the fifth grade, at least. Dallas, who drove the school bus (representing route 24) told him a new story. Well, he told some girls the story but Junior was listening. Doesn't really matter how conversation came to Wishkah, *something something going to the mall*, and Dallas tells them Wishkah used to be different. It's all changed since he visited in its earliest years. In fact, if Dallas recalled, there

used to be *stuff* underground. Teenagers would sneak downstairs and throw parties. Underground raves and other things teenagers used to do. The existence of a downstairs was news to these girls (anything in Wishkah not called Limited Too would be news to them, Junior thought before looking out the window again) and they asked Dallas how to get down there. That's when he said it's best they don't go snooping where they don't belong.

From secret burned rubble to secret underground raves. Junior was growing up. But the story continued to mutate. One kid had been down there and it was boring. One kid had been down there and it was awesome. One kid went down there and touched a girl's boob(?). For all the stories, Junior can't remember anyone denying the basements existence. Occam's Razor would be *there is a sublevel but it's just storage and maintenance stuff, nothing crazy*. And maybe it was due to nobody saying so that what *could* be downstairs was so fascinating.

Beyond the one time he'd opened the door and looked down the stairs and got yelled at, Junior remembers asking the concierge. Yeah, Wishkah had a concierge desk. Right in the Pantheon. Gave directions, collected Lost & Found items, called security. In the eighth or ninth grade he played dumb and asked for a store that wouldn't draw suspicion (Zumiez). The concierge told him Zumiez was on floor two of the east wing, suite 214 or something, and he lied and said he thought it was downstairs. He was told, point blank, there is no downstairs.

Before then every Wishkah basement story blew past his neck. But that was a lie. He'd already seen the stairs. Now, the concierge could've said this to deter him from wandering somewhere he shouldn't, and if he never worked at Best Buy he'd accept that niche genre of lie adults are just allowed to tell kids. But he did work at Best Buy, didn't he? (he did)

One week, again stirred by the Wishkah basement stories, he'd pilfered a Geek Squad polo from the break room and

donned his first employee disguise in what Junior's only now realizing might be a pattern. Lanyard and all, he marched to a security guard and said *Hey it's uh Matt from Geek Squad, we got a call saying someone on your team needs help with their screens.*

>our screens? The security guard asked him.

*Yeah for the security cameras.*

>I'm gonna radio someone, he said ominously.

*Oh I was told to meet with someone from your department,* Junior told him. *Downstairs,* he nearly forgot to add.

>There is no downstairs, the mall cop said.

So Junior ran, and the mall cop didn't chase him because what's the point, but now he was two for two on mall employees knowingly lying about the stairs. Dammit, *he saw them.* And now more than one person\* has told him to his face it's a real thing. A real, incomprehensible thing. Under lesser stakes Junior would heed the warnings, but he can't think of greater stakes than forty minutes to midnight.

Now where the hell is Otto.

Wheezing in the Pantheon, hands on a tiled planter, Junior whips around like a bird. On his way here he saw south crew boys he doesn't recognize walking along the second floor. All they gave him was the passing glance of confusion. No Otto. Well, if he's not here then he must be around one of the basement entrances. The long stairs leading down what in his memory was a thousand feet. When he had gotten yelled at all those years ago, it was the door in the hallway by the... by the... by the JCPenney! Oh, fuck Junior, that's back the other way.

What a great time to get that Runner's High this would be. Any minute now.

Two wings to go before he's at JCPenney and his feet are

trapped in cement shoes. His quads burn like they haven't since he ran the mile (best time: 11:21). Twice his Zippo fell out of his pocket and on the second slip he didn't bother stopping to pick it up. The first time he bent down his stomach sucked into his throat. Clammy and a forehead burning in frustration, Junior presses on, taking a tight line against the lefthand row of shops, six or seven tiles per step, slamming into Tristan so hard he flips onto his back.

"*Woah woah woah*," Tristan, Clayton, Jack, and the newly christened Simon alarm as Junior fights for the wind knocked clean out of his lungs. "There you went," Jack says in his cool Jack way. "Find Otto?"

"—*Guh*—"

"We saw him way up by the movie theater half an hour ago. Know what's going on with him? He didn't say anything when we hollered."

"—*Guh*—"

"You good, bro?"

"—*JCP*."

Clapping his hands, Jack repeats "JCP," putting out a hand and pulling Junior to his boots.

Five strong, the south crew jogs the corner, hunting for their last boy and dragging Junior behind like a fat dog. To Jack, Otto must have said he'd meet them all back at JCPenney, like that was something he told Junior in confidence. Won't they be confused, perhaps worried, if Otto's not there.

Aren't they confused, worried, that Otto's not here. Everyone stops to stand around looking stuck but Junior, who blasts past their wall of shoulders and down the hall on the left. This leads back outside, and without Junior telling them where he's going they're left to assume he's running outside.

"Bro, it's not going down yet," Jack yells.

“Yeah, we got twenty-ish minutes,” Clayton adds. “And we’re supposed to leave out the other way.”

All this wafts past Junior’s ears as he skirts a third of the way down the hall and struggles with the green basement door he’d opened so many years ago. Locked. Fuckfuckfuck, he pulls the spanner from his belt loop and smashes the knob. It won’t budge and shitfuckgoddammit he busts the thin beam window into pebbles, reaching through and opening the door on the other side. Concerned for their crewmates behavior, how nice of them, the south crew is thoughtful enough to ask Junior if he’s good.

Door open, flashlights on, the south crew takes in the derelict shell of a janitors closet. Six or seven feet to the back wall on the other side.

“Yeah,” Jack says, “there’s also an exit that way, bro.”

FUCK

Junior throws his spanner at the far wall of the stupid fucking janitor’s closet as hard as he can, making everyone step aside as the iron boomerang boinks on the concrete and comes spinning back. Literally no way he was thinking of another door. The memory’s crystal spring water clear in the front of his head. It sticks out further than his nose. The neurotic want for these guys to think he’s a chiller flies south as constipated anger goes pound for pound with his agonizing chest.

“WheredidyouseeOttolast,” drools from his lip to the floor.

“Same as you,” Tristan says. “By the GameStop.”

“No dipshit,” Jack snaps, “I just said he was going up to the movie theater. I saw him.”

“So where would he be now,” Simon wonders, uselessly. Stay out of it, Simon.

Clayton adds, “Hey, do you guys remember that job we were supposed to do?”

“The charges?” Simon.

“No, the other one,” Clayton says, “yes the charges, dumbass. Remember the route?”

“We had a route?”

“Yeah, and we’d stop at the... big thing in the middle,” Jack answers, flashing a PDF on his phone.

“Pantheon elevator...” Junior spits.

“*Hey, how about walking?*” Simon, again uselessly, suggests when Junior’s already running.

It’s two turns to the right and one to the left, back to the Pantheon. In Mall Walker jargon that’s two-thousand feet—and *we all know how those guys feel about feet*. A spot of gallows humor now that Junior legitimately thinks he’s gonna die the moment he stops running. What could the clock be now? Fifteen minutes? Is he the moron for not budgeting this smarter? Sorry, he didn’t factor *ghosts* into all this. That development slowed things down a little. Time’s slipping away from him. Any and all basement visiting time in the current best case scenario is making itself scarce. If he could go back he’d do this smarter. Have all the cards in the first hour and be rubbing elbows with basement ravers or charred skeletons. A kidney for more time, if that’s the one you can give away and be alright.

Back at the Pantheon, now prepared for disappointment, Otto is once again absent. If Jack’s correct and Otto knows to be at the Pantheon anyway then all they’d have to do is wait. Waiting is not an option where it concerns Junior, however, and he’s getting pouty. Patronizing word to use but that’s what’s happening. *Goddammit shit Otto I thought you needed me*, Junior repeats to himself twice. What’s he gonna do with one keycard? Why didn’t Junior take that fucking swipecard when it was right in front—

*Bin... bong.*

Is that the elevator?

Catching up to Junior, either Clayton or Tristan says, “is that the elevator?” taking the words right out of his mouth. “How’s that still working?”

“Power’s still on in some places,” Jack then suggests. “Like, I wouldn’t get in there, y’know, personally, but if—”

“Elevators use electricity?” Simon asks.

“Yeah, dipshit, what would they be using?”

“I thought it was like a bunch of weights coming up and down.”

“Uh-huh, but you need power to do those things. The engine in your car can’t just go.”

“Scuze me for asking questions, dude. *He who asks is a fool for a minute, and he who does not is a foo—*”

“Oh!” Four fingers slap Junior at the spine. It’s Jack, remembering “don’t we have to go downstairs?”

“Too late for that,” Clayton blows out his mouth, “we have to be outta here in like ten minutes.”

“Okay, but Neil’s gonna be pissed we didn’t check for that Subduction Zone shit. Or whatever.”

From around the elevator doors, Junior psyches himself up to see Otto emerge with his keycard, on a plate made of Danish porcelain, a handkerchief draped over his forearm. Disappointingly, it’s just more indoor guys on their way out of the building. Seems every cell is joining together for the walk out. Did Neil ask them to do this? In any case, with two elevator trips, eighteen of the twenty-four boys on the checklist have conglomerated at the Pantheon by happenstance. Otto is not one of them.

Jack, Clayton, Tristen and Simon know some of these guys and conversation gets painfully casual. Just the stuff they’ve seen around Wishkah—one of them found a cash register but, oh poo, there wasn’t any loot inside. And another, get this,



found Subway's old sandwich livery. Junior's seen things you people wouldn't believe.

"Anyone seen Otto?" Junior asks everybody at once.

"Yeah, yeah," he's glad to see Jack back him up, "we need him. Y'all seen him?"

A lot of shaking heads, a lot of chickens in a coop just glancing and bobbing around. Useless. Sorry, that's rude. He's not mad at them, he's mad at the situation.

"Is he the quiet guy?"

"Who said that?!"

A little too pumped to have a lead, Junior pushes his way through the brush of orange vests. As if he'd recognize anyone but his main five or Austin or maybe that guy who wanted to find Simon. No such case here. It's some tall guy with glasses and hair that curls weird at the ends, heretofore unseen.

"Is Otto the quiet guy," glasses repeats, "walks with his head down."

"Yes! Where did you see him?"

"Relax, okay? If he's on the list they won't detonate until he's out. He'll be right here in a minute if he's smart."

*"Where did you see him?"*

"On the... on the bridge down that-a way," glasses waves a hand behind him, towards the south wing. "Looked like he was looking for y'all."

"Okay, okay, *everybody!*" Junior finds himself shouting. A rare surge of confidence he's got half a mind to milk. "Otto has a security access card. One of four. I have the other three. Before we leave, we need to check the basement."

Huzzah? The boys are silent.

"There's a basement?" another asks.

“Yeah, and I guess there might be something dangerous down there,” Jack steps up to add. “Subduction Zone, is what it’s called.”

“Oh, the fuckin’...” someone else says. “The guy from the north was telling me about that. Like we would get a deduction if something downstairs—”

“A deduction?!” Glasses again. “Fuck that shit. Where’s the door?”

“I don’t know,” Junior has to admit. “I thought it was back—”

“The elevator can go down.”

Now who said that? “Who said that?”

Bold as love, to be in this part of town, Junior whips around behind his back. The makings of a turf war, this. Dark blue vests, all smooth and laundered. Pristine looking boys to go with ‘em, the north crew. Austin and his five lackeys, but another twelve or so blue vests follow in a loose queue. Guess the north had the same orders to group up at the end. For shame, shared demolition company. Promoting gang violence like this.

“Oh shit, *Tokyo Drift*,” Austin laughs. Does he mean Junior? Holy shit, did he address Junior first?

“Sup, loser,” Jack intervenes. “Have you touched my girl?”

“No, I touched your sister.”

Boys, please, things are tense enough as is.

“Do you remember Otto?” Junior asks Austin, slipping in real fast to break that one up.

“The guy who won?”

“Yeah, him, have you seen him recently?”

“On the bridge back the way we came. Thought he was coming here.”

“He’s how we get into the basement.”

From the sideeye, Junior notices Jack, Clayton, Tristen, and Simon already walking past him and past the migrating north crew. Some of those guys then turn around in accordance. Then it’s everyone. The manhunt is on.

. . .

Somehow, despite this being a little under forty brains working together, only Junior thinks to take the spiral stairs of the Pantheon up to the second floor, where he’d last been spotted. From up here he can see the migration, orange and blue vests sloshing together. This is more people talking about him at once than he’d ask for, and in a subversion of his nightmares it’s not about how weird he is or how he’s a liar. *Oh yeah, I think he’s usually with the north but he’s filling in for a south guy today. Really? I don’t remember him. Nah, nah, I think I’ve seen him before on a job out in Shoreline. Oh, okay. Cool.*

He’s off running again. Rallying the entire mall has bought him a few minutes, optimistically, but having to hunt Otto down has been far from ideal. How many times has he stopped where he thought he’d find him and come up short? Hm, it was the Pantheon, the first time, then the door by the JCPenney, then back at the Pantheon again. So this would make the fourth. Bogus. Nothing ever happens on the fourth attempt. The next appealing number is five so what Junior imagines will happen is his small company of vests will comb the whole south side with no sign of Otto only to come back around to the Panth

*Oh shit!*

Taking his sweet time, really, gliding fingertips from window to window, column to column, Otto hasn’t noticed Junior drifting the corner and almost falling to his side. He’s not holding the card or looking any sort of way to suggest he’s making for the basement with any urgency.

*“Otto, Otto!”*

Waving hands over his head like he's signaling a ship, Junior bounds around the stairs poking through the walkway, fishing in his pocket for the three keycards. He splits the hand in his fingers, showing off the three distinct colors. "I have the rest!"

While Otto stops and makes courteous eye contact with Junior, there's something gloomy behind him. Hands limp at his sides, he only acknowledges the cards at best.

"Do you still have yours?"

Carefully, Otto nods.

"... Can I have it?"

Beat.

"How about we go together? Do you know where we get to—wait! Austin said there's a way down through the elevator. The elevator in the Pantheon. Y'know, the big... the big open space in the center."

He licks his lips. Whatever he's thinking about, he has to saw through it like tough steak.

"Okay, yeah, yeah, so let's go."

Step, step, step, step, okay Otto's not following him. Turning back around, yes, Otto hasn't moved. All he's done is produce the Planet 16 card from his pocket. He inspects the plastic in a disinterested trance.

"Come on," Junior shoulders. "We don't have a lotta time left."

Otto snorts.

Pacing back towards him, the frustration in his gut finds a new cinder. "I think you already know what's down there."

Looking back up at him, as if to agree, Otto waits for an elaboration. A kid who resigns themselves to a lecture from their parents.

“In fact I think you wrote that note in the arcade, and I think you know all about the... the people I’ve been seeing, and I *know* you know Ritchie up at the Super Sears. He mentioned you when I got the card. What’s going on?”

“What is downstairs?”

“Why don’t you talk.”

“ᠢᠵᠤ ᠵᠠᠵᠢ ᠭᠢᠨ ᠵᠢᠭ ᠣᠲ ᠤᠵᠤ ᠵᠤᠪᠦ᠋ᠭᠦ ᠲᠦᠨᠢᠪ ᠤ.”

“—What?”

No but actually what. Otto goes beyond orthodox gibberish. Nothing about what he says has any relation to how Junior knows speech to work, let alone English. The inflections wind up, rather than start. Rude as it may be to say about the way someone talks, it makes Junior feel unwell.

His hands move before he thinks about what he’s doing. In his right hand are the three cards and as he turns around saying something hollow like *come on man let’s go back* he feels the fourth card in his left hand, swiped from Otto’s closing fingers. Then he’s running.

Apologies to Otto and his creepy mouth but the idea of holding all four cards so close to victory was too much. *The things we do when we don’t have time*, Junior thinks before relegating all systems to getting one foot in front of the other. He certainly hears Otto behind him now, probably also running. Never struck him as an eight-minute mile kid and it’s tough but not impossible to keep a distance as Junior books it back to the Pantheon.

He hated elevators. Always did. Had he seen some horror movie where a gremlin chewed through the wire and sent the human sardine tin plummeting down to Styx? No, it had to be proximity. In your story about having to share the elevator with

some creep loser, you were riding with Junior. Having the elevator to himself wasn't much better. Knowing him, he'd be the rescue operation that gets called off early. Too risky for the team. He should've been more careful. Also, who is that guy anyway?

Wishkah's Pantheon Wonkavator inspires trace awe in kids and people for which a mall visit is some quantum of luxury. Any time the elevator's not plugged into the wall it's obligated to play the centerpiece. Surrounded on all sides by frosted glass, the golden-lit elevators, two of them side by side, glide through the squeeze like Christmas lights buried under snow. Fashionable for the eighties. That said, it services all of two floors, where it's situated, so looking lavish is the only goal.

But it doesn't only service two floors, now does it.

Floors on the mind, Junior looks up to the point where the elevator shaft collides with the high ceiling, disappearing into the kaleidoscope of mirrors, and something is off. A detail so insignificant he never thought to dedicate it much space in his head until it was gone. What is he trying to remember? To do with the ceiling—oh shit, that's right. Isn't there supposed to be a crack in the glass? Yeah, he's remembering now. It always struck him as so odd; how could someone break glass up that high? Right up by the elevator shaft. But he could be thinking of somewhere else. The box office just before the cinemas, maybe. He's got bigger things to think about right now.

Pulling around to the doors, brushedsteel and lockjawed, he jams his pointer finger at an angle smashing the call button. Ready to go already, the chime chimes its chime and the doors part to the elevator's hall of mirror walls and art instillation lights. The rider shut inside is warped to a kaleidoscope of stars and tracers. Even now the lights stand at attention with only a few inconsequential duds. He presses the door close button, hearing footsteps from beyond the frosted glass. Door-closedoorclosedoorclosedoorclose

Holding the button with his finger (a trick he learned from a

YouTube video) keeps them separated, so long as Otto doesn't hulk the split apart. Hold on, maybe he might. Junior hasn't been all that great figuring him out. He panics, scanning the control board three times over for a button to go down. 2, 1, fireman hat, call help/cancel, door open, door close, alarm, two key sockets but they aren't swipecards they're just normal keys

Oh, hello.

Below the main archipelago of buttons, unnoticeable to anyone not scanning or aweing at the lights, about knee level to Junior, is a thin slit in the metal. Squared at the corners, completely missable in its unremarkableness. A normal mall patron would think it's some utility feature. Six hours ago Junior would have thought the same thing.

Fumbling with the keycards in his hand, he realizes that yes this is a utility feature, stupid. And while the slot is perfectly card-sized, nothing happens when he inserts the Wishkah Cinemas card. He flips around the card and, again, nothing. None of the four orientations returned anything and, yes, he did try all four. God willing it's just the wrong card.

Next he tries the blue Super Sears card. Dammit, Ritchie should've told him the order. Or that bartender girl. One way, no, flip it over, no, try the other side, no, dammit dammit.

Card number three. The dull gold Planet 16 card. One way, no, flip it over, no, try the other side—ah! Ah! AAAAAAAA

Overreaction, but not only is Junior excited to hear a rough industrial buzz, he's unnerved by this elevator plunging under the floor. The mingling of the cabin's yellow sparkling lights with the natural ambiance of beyond the frosted glass washes away, now only a prismatic projection.

*Where can you find a room where there's no doors and no windows but inside is a star?*

"Hey, Otto!"

A minor quake of footsteps over Junior's head. The gang's

caught up, maybe spying him and Otto playing tag back to the Pantheon. Hard to tell who's talking under the concrete.

*"Yeah, same, I just saw Otto and whatshisname running—"*

*"Nah, nah, I saw them running to the exit."*

*"Which exit?"*

*"I dunno, I think the east?"*

*"Oh, so they went out?"*

*"I'll text Otto but I think they're out."*

Momentary panic fizzles up and dissolves in Junior's clearer head. Sure, it'd be scary if everyone thought he was outside Wishkah when he wasn't. But he and Otto are on the list—wherever Otto ran off to—and Neil was quite serious about counting everybody. He'll see the basement and be out with a good enough excuse. Sorry, I got lost on the way out. Wanted to double-check a charge that looked improperly mounted. Oops, time got away from me, good thing you guys remembered to check

Wait, is Otto on the list?

Is Junior on the list?

Shit.

Uh, so Junior's elevator ride is garnished with a cold chill. One of those critical life or death moments he's heard about. He's the treasure hunter who must choose between his sack of gold and the hand of his reluctant friend hanging from a sheer cliff. A basement so tantalizingly close and—checking his



phone—three minutes to explore it all. Admittedly, he hopes it's not much. Were it just storage he could look around, agree that's what it is, and head back up. Mystery solved. Ironical, he thinks, feeling the elevator come to a stop after plummeting down a long, long way. He's really hoping what he finds down here is nothing special.

Roll out the red carpet. The doors open to a slowly declining hall, walls about as wide as the elevator he's just disembarked. Long segmented light tubes rip out from an unpolished concrete ceiling, solid and untarnished. The perfection with which they shine, unflickering, unnerves worse than the horror show he'd been psyching himself up to endure. Air vents blemish the walls opposite the segments of light. Freaky uniformity. Surely one hall doesn't need this much ventilation. How far down could they possibly be? If this is storage, they'd still need to access it from somewhere outside. Ramps for freight trucks. More exits than this one hall and this one elevator. What Junior's trying to work out right now is where the *other* elevator leads. The one operating in vertical lockstep. To a different, parallel hallway? Unless this is the one that goes down... he should probably get moving.

He feels better, now he's convinced himself of an exit waiting to be discovered. It'll just be a matter of getting the big freight doors open. Shouldn't be an issue; what *doesn't* work in here, honestly. Pray someone shuts it off before they detonate the comical heaviness enveloping several hundred miles of live wiring. So let's say Junior has fifteen minutes, factoring in the time for everyone on the list to get out and however long cutting the power takes. Proceeding down the hall, his feet make note of the soft decline, slapping down on the angle, walking a little faster than he means to

All at once, the row of light tubes pops off. Literally, the power gives out with a distinct pop. Briefly reminded of Super Sears, Junior powers on his flashlight. Maybe he doesn't have as much time as he's being woefully optimistic to think. Ex-

ploding in a stinging, cold sweat, legs wobbly and weak, Junior knows in the painful pinsandneedles way he does not have much time. At all.

First came a choir of dulled sirens. Horns of the angels. Metals from a different world, sound unnatural to the unnatural. Falling in and out of synch, Junior counts more than ten, more than fifty. At their most random, the blaring sirens were an unending droll, the next taking up the halt of the last. Then they fell back, hundreds strong—a monotonous, serious warning. He thinks of the color red and he tastes metal.

And the door, six paces in front, illuminated in a third by his phone. The only door he's seen today with a knob. Curious, caught in the throat, Junior looks back the way he came to elevator doors more shut than when he entered. Does he imagine the strain of metal beneath the snuffed siren, the split iron gate forcing itself tighter than he could ever jack apart. Does he imagine the fine dust seeping down from the ventilation, knocked loose by the tidal shift of something on the surface. A question that doesn't need an answer. As if Junior doesn't know what's above.

What he genuinely doesn't know, what pains him to feel quicker than he could be ready, is if those sirens he's hearing are the charges.

In so many sounds, boom.

He never thought something so loud couldn't be a volcano or a meteor. He never thought a sound like this could be followed by anything but the excruciating end. His fingers go limp. Above the quake he can't hear his phone hit the ground. Seems impossible an explosion of this magnitude, only rivaled by the birth of a neutron star, could get louder. Or maybe it's getting closer.

All he's got is that last door and the hope that whatever's beyond that twilight zone is strong enough to hold up the largest shopping mall in the northwest as it comes back home to

Earth. Junior launches himself forward, tremors all around him intense enough to rattle his teeth and churn his blood and his hand finds a knob he's almost too sweaty to turn unless he uses both hands which he has to before he can fall beyond the threshold and knock the door shut with a transitional kick and drop to the floor with his hands over his head. And he prays. Junior has never prayed.

. . .

*It's hot. Too hot for a hoodie but he feels weird about his cigarette arms and, well, it was free. Commemorative hoodies for all the seniors, with the graduating year on the back and the school's racoon mascot on the front. Wishkah high school—home of the Trash Pandas.*

*Trash Panda is a meme. Under different circumstances he doubts the school would embrace this in-joke title the students selected themselves. That said, from 1951 to his graduating year they were the Wishkah Racoons, which students and families attending football and basketball games naturally shortened to what's technically a racial epithet. After what must've been a tense PTA meeting, Wishkah high school accepted Trash Pandas.*

*He sits alone on the rusty modular bleachers out by the track. No Man's Land outside of school hours. Even gym class only uses this thing reluctantly. A blemish too typical of what must be the most underfunded school in the district. He's taken the top of the bleachers, as is his right as a graduating senior. Following Last Day of School procedure, he arrived with no backpack. In the twelve grades and twelve Last Days of School, showing up sans backpack has never felt natural. Rare enough that it's always exciting. Makes carrying around the yearbook a pain, though. In middle school the "yearbooks" were thin enough this wasn't a problem. When he got to high school and the page counts approached biblical he started to understand handbags.*

*Twelfth verse same as the first—his only picture is the one*

*they're obligated to give him. A face so unremarkable he has a hard time recognizing his own photograph. Smile, next time—oh wait. He must be the asshole for not joining any after school clubs or playing sports. But even if he did, the yearbook club clearly has favorites. It's always those kids. The sociable ones. He never believed in "types" of high schoolers—Factions, he means. Rather, he imagined a sliding scale of social intelligence. He's somewhere at the lower end, sharing space with the kids who don't speak English.*

*As such, his yearbook has a lot of everything but himself. This time, if nowhere else, he thought he'd wander into a photograph in progress. No cigar. If he was approached for a candid shot, hypothetically, he imagines his presence among the rest of the goofballs and genuine achievers would be emblematic of nothing. Yeah, cool, another kid with a Jansport. Look around you, sailor.*

*That said (thought, alone), he checks the front and back for signatures. Asking people seemed pushy, in the moment. Both in and between classes. What does a kid get from asking for a signature? When you arrive at school, with your yearbook and disposable Bic pen in tow, your incoming signatures are preordained. Friends—possibly besties—lower tier friends, classmates of an elevated camaraderie. Teachers. He didn't have anyone like that, and no one was offering their signature otherwise. What he ended up doing, to the horror of the unfortunate third party, was leave his yearbook open on that blank back slate with an open pen wrenching the spine apart. The ol' tip jar method. Would you kindly, O good stranger.*

*The front end is naked. Devoid of even a HAGS. Come on. HAGS requires nothing from the author. Sweatpants of signatures. Hell, at least if some future Last Comic Standing winner walked by and drew a penis, that'd be interaction. But he doesn't feel betrayed by this lack of interest. He's had twelve years to get used to it.*

*When he flips the billion trillion pages over to the back side,*

*he's worried for a moment he picked up somebody else's year-book. On the last two blank pages in the back, there's notes. In no particular order: Bye & good luck out there, catch you on the flip (?), bye boob, see you around. Ladies and gentlemen, we've got HAGS. And there's a few more, and really they're all variations on the same idea, but it's gotta be at least twelve. He scans the penmanship for a name. No way any girl would use crack open one of those special gel pens if this was the job.*

*Some of these are hard to read. Fresh summer sun beats down on bleachwhite pages. His eyes hurt. No, no, this is definitely his copy. Glitter gel pens. Huh.*

*The notes aren't remarkable. Eleven or twelve, maybe. Barely half a single classroom accumulated. Not one of them writes out his name. Every one of them must be the product of somebody who saw the book open to the back page, caught in the midst of a signature kick. It'd be rude to ignore the kernel of sincerity in these messages, however. Some mystery writer is gonna see him around. Somebody wished him good luck.*

*He blinks and there's a wet dot by his finger. A shooting star when his thumb does a windshield wipe. On the second he accepts that he's crying. Like anyone who scribbled on this page meant to with more than half a genuine feeling. If they saw him now maybe they'd regret trying to be nice. Making someone cry is always weird like that. Especially when it's him of all hims.*

*An unconscious closing of the book prevents him from fucking up any more of the precious scratch. He's crying, he accepts, because school is over. He did this for what is, currently, the majority of his life. At no point was he ever content with getting up at six and sitting down for phonics at eight. And between classes there's functionally no one he could point out and call a friend. Content isn't the word. It's just what he knew. This is the place he exists, most of the time, these are the kids he sees every day. After today he won't see them again and after today he'll likely never be back. Every classroom he left was*

*the last one. School is over. Whether or not you liked the routine of it all, it's over. His head falls to the front cover of the yearbook. His throat hurts.*

*This is what Junior chooses, for his final thought. Before he dies. Warm sun. Behind clouds. Yearbook on the bleachers.*

*Film reel. Closet. Two-sixty-four, two-eighty-eight, three-twelve, three-thirty-six, three-sixty, three-eighty-four, four-o'-eight, 1107-717619-99111*

. . .

What an embarrassing final memory. Glad no one saw, and glad he isn't dead. In that order.

For long enough to cough, the air is flooded with dust. Realistically that's what would kill him if the underground somehow held up against the unfathomable tonnage of Wishkah in jigsaw pieces. How long could he survive down here, he thinks. Apparently the people breathing in the World Trade Center on day one and died of cancer on day 2,043 are still counted as fatalities. Actually he can't recall any stories of Wishkah deaths. Had to have been one or two. Do gunshots in the parking lot count? Oh shit, what if this ends up his last thought. Overly anal about cause of death. Shit, shit, shit, uh...

The trip to Disney World was pretty cool. 2007. Hollywood Studios still had the big Sorcerer's Apprentice hat in the way of the Chinese Theatre replica, ruining pictures for nearly ten years. Y'know what, this one also sucks, sorry. Hard to think when it's still so loud. Loud in a different way, which Junior chalks up to pressure (instead of collecting a nice memory). The demolition of Wishkah upstairs sounds like a vacuum cleaner sucking up something big and solid. The downstairs must have created an air bubble under all the pressure, one that's quickly seeping through the wreckage, knocking a bunch of big Wishkah chunks loose. Yeah. That's gotta be what he's hearing.

Risking precious seconds he could spend trying to recall

something nice, Junior carefully and timidly takes his hands off his head, glancing up like a turtle. In the panic, he never stopped to check what sort of room he'd just hurled himself inside. Surely that garage he'd been psyching himself up for. His eyes adjust, and he thinks what he's seeing now is another hall.

Just as wide as the first, with the same HVAC compliances. Actually, no, it's not exactly the same. In here the vents are aligned to the floor. Just barely, he can make out the ghostly form of dust wafting inside the grills, splitting apart midair according to the suction of whichever vent is closer. Wafting is a poor choice of words. The vents suck in dust with a near-mechanical force.

So, eureka. Clearly he made the right choice, picking flight over fight. However this hall is wired on the ventilation grid, the end result is a powerful outtake effect. Where the fresh air is coming from is a question less important to him than why the light tubes, in here, are on the floor.

Exposed, lacking a pane of glass to protect the fragile tubes. Apparently employees who would be working with a lot of heavy storage stuff are supposed to deftly navigate around these lights. There's a faint blue ambiance about the first third of the hall, concentrating maybe a third of the way down and leaving everything beyond its influence a void. Emergency lights? Junior flips over gatorstyle to check the ceiling and sees the pinprick LED of his phone staring back.

At the door, the one he spilled through, he sees now the brief falling sensation he felt diving through to the other side wasn't the effect of his own jump. The threshold of the door is equidistant from floor to ceiling, vertically symmetrical, made unique only by the doorknob now on the lefthand side. Yes, his phone suspended above his head is better evidence of what's going on, but he needed to be sure.

Maybe he is dead. Deep in his guts, a tingling uneasiness ferments. Jet lag down under. It's quiet, but that could either

mean the implosion is over or this is what the waiting room for the next life is like. A version of your last few sensations. Sirens included. *Sirens included?* No, this must be something else. This only sounds *like* the charges from a minute ago. If asked (doesn't matter why) Junior would describe the siren, to pick out a singular, as a descending note. And while there's just as many mingling notes now—just as loud, too—the tone is very distinctly ascending.

Sucking to a *gniq!*, the lights in the floor switch on. Junior's rendered a stinging-sweat lump, now he can look up and see a concrete floor rising at a shallow incline towards a set of elevator doors. A thin, gangly union boy is down here. To say he's *up there*, walking on the ceiling, taking nervous steps back up the way he came. Interesting choice of hard hat, this guy. A bicycle helmet haphazardly spraypainted white.

Horried in a way only rivaled by his immediate death two minutes ago, Junior sits still on his version of the floor, knees up to his chest, praying that guy doesn't see him. And that guy never does, retreating back to the elevator, never looking back the way he's going, neglecting to press the button for the floor he wants. But the doors close anyway, and Junior listens to the sucking mechanics of the elevator shaft going updown or maybe downup.

Well, he's not dead. Count your blessings.

. . .

With nothing to throw (he remembers losing the Zippo and his spanner), Junior boosts off the wall and glints the call button. Miraculously, it works. Coming up—or maybe coming down (ugh)—the elevator doors slide open and Junior awkwardly steps over the elevated threshold to the ~~ceiling~~ (fuck it, he'll think about this in relative terms) floor of the cabin. Pressing floor 2, only because it's the one he can reach, the sensations only get more nauseating. Long story short (imagine that) Junior's inner ear is not playing nice with what he's seeing, and in turn how he should be seeing those things. Looking up at the



floor does not compute. He loses his balance, falling into the wall, but when the doors shut and he's left alone with the golden string lights and the labyrinthian effect of the windows playing tennis with the reflection, he can pretend things are normal.

As the doorbell goes *gaud!* for floor 2, the brief moment he can pretend things are normal comes to an end. He's been dumped at the far end of the food court, in the odd transition between quick service options and normal stores. Geographically, the food court occupies the start of the north wing, positioned above what is going to be, among other stores, an American Eagle, an Abercrombie, either a Hollister or a... PacSun? None of them were ever Junior's thing so it's hard to place which douche clothes for teenagers store is which.

Of course, he's only let off on the second floor topographically. Where he ends up is the ceiling of the Pantheon.

Forgetting the gap, Junior hops off the elevator and straight down to the sea of mirrors below. In the quite sudden drop he neglects to measure how far he's falling, but it's enough to make an ugly cracking noise when he collides with a four-way intersection of mirrors shoulder-first. Groaning, reaggravating his stretched and strained lungs from running earlier, he lies on the mirrors, first shutting his eyes in pain before forcing them open. He can't deny his curiosity, what Wishkah's ceiling would look like from this perspective.

A salt flat. Broken up by the thin border of the panels, the mirrors deny a surface, absorbing instead the projection of the floor above. Proof is in practice. Junior finds himself rolling a foot across the glass. He has to ground himself; he has to remind himself this is a surface.

Standing up, allured to the middle of this salt flat, Junior fights against a chronic imbalance. He jumped into the deep end too soon. Hallways and elevators spoiled him with spots to stick out an arm and keep from doubling over. Now he wobbles like a baby, arms out and windmilling for centrifugal force. He hopes no one can see him. *Can* anyone see him?

Junior glances back at where he'd fallen. The severity of the crack he's produced by falling onto the mirrors compels him to check his arm for cuts. Looks okay. He thinks about what he's just done. Operative word being *He*, if he is to understand how operative words work. Earlier today, he'd seen that crack in the ceiling. Right before going to the basement, no crack. Right before he dropped onto the ceiling, no crack. Now that he's fallen, there's a crack.

Years ago he'd wondered who could've broken something that high up. Years ago, he'd wondered about this and seen this for the first time. How old would he have been: Eight? Nine?

What else is he about to already have done?

That's not a rhetorical question. *Otto* is to say, whether he wants to or not.

Booking it about as fast as it can be booked given the circumstances, Junior navigates to where he's about to reunite with Otto. Grains of sand crack under his feet.

It sure felt like he was running faster, at the time. But even as turned around as he is right now, inner ear no less cantankerous, he catches up to the Junior giving Otto chase. Except now Junior can watch the existentially funny scenario of a completely backwards footrace. A flawless technique, these boys have. Ever walk backwards, let alone sprint? Nerves flick to the on position, desperate to twist the head and check what we're about to meet assfirst. The uncanniness of the motion should be a little scary, Junior thinks, but he may be the littlest bit numb to the uncanny. There's already a lot going on.

Junior chases the rewind back to the beginning, cringing at the awkward beetred face of the past Junior as he fights against his own lungs. He has a theory, as to why Otto sounded to disconcerting, and he's excited to see if it's true. Fresh as this perspective makes Wishkah feel, it does demand greater brain power to navigate. On every corner but the last Junior thinks he knows where he's going, only to bank the opposite direction

and have to course correct via the Ankle Breaker Shuffle.

Here we are. Junior stops, sitting down on the mirrors, watching Junior hand Otto back the keycard. Talking about himself with his own name makes him queasy. Dissociative. How about that Junior is Roinuj? Or, in this case, he's the one going backwards. But also it's not like he's created two Juniors by doing this. Forget it. Brain hurts.

“ʎɹɹɹɹɹ ...” Junior says.

“I don't expect you to get me just yet.”

“ɹɹɹɹɹ ɹɹɹɹɹ ɹɹɹɹɹ ɹɹɹɹɹ”

Egg on his face. So that's why, at this point, Otto had stopped looking at him. Nodding off into space. He was looking at the ceiling.

Their eyes definitely meet. This isn't a coincidence. Yawing his head to one side, Otto returns the gesture. Junior looks down at his younger, dumber self. That guy's desperately trying to get some cooperation out of another guy who's way, way ahead of him. Soon, that Junior takes off, backwards, leaving Otto alone to, as it seemed to be at the time, wander aimlessly.

“See? It freaks people out, the way I talk.”

Junior asks, “Am I... talking backwards? To you?”

“Yup.”

“Then how—”

“I've been doing this a long time. You get used to the language, listening to enough examples. I call it Antiform. Like it?”

“... Are we in the basement? Am *I* in the basement?”

“I was asking if you liked the name.”

“Oh. Yeah, it's really super clever. Now how about helping me out?”

“No one will want to teach you if you’re gonna have an attitude, you know.”

“Come on man, I’m kind of freaking out—”

“I know, okay? Your first question is about the basement.”

Junior’s bottom lip searches for a hold.

Otto repeats, “Am I right?”

“Anyone could’ve guessed that.”

“Answer is, as best as I can tell, yes. You *were* in the basement. Clearly, however, you came out. What happened is you had passed through a door that flipped you over and spun you around. You’re about to ask me what that’s supposed to mean. It’s supposed to mean at the bottom of Wishkah is Wishkah. Not *another* Wishkah; Be careful with that phrasing. The *same* Wishkah. What you are about to see is everything that has already happened. Next you’re gonna ask how I know all this. The last time I answered that I think I gave you the wrong idea, so let me speak carefully: time inside Wishkah bounces back and forth, from the day it goes up to the day it goes down. You’ve arrived at the day Wishkah closes, one of two points in time you can enter the ‘Jetstream,’ the ‘Current,’ whatever you wanna call this—and you have given it a lot of names. You’re gonna say, despite my answers, none of this makes sense. So either I, in all the times I’ve given you this spiel, have never found the correct words, or the correct words don’t exist. In any case, there’s something very important I need you to do. But you gotta trust me.”

Blank faced, Junior rises to his feet. “Alright,” he says.

“Great! Stay right there. We’re ahead of schedule.”

Walking, backwards, back down the hall, Otto disappears. Should’ve asked how long he’d have to wait, but then again Otto would know if that’s something Junior would ever ask. If he has the order right.

A minute passes. He feels a rap on his shoulder—two fin-

gers. Otto is standing behind him, a dance partner for the mirrored ceiling cha-cha.

“Hey. So you just talked to me.”

“... Yeah.”

“Knew it. Let’s move.”

. . . .

They stride across the melancholic ceiling of Super Sears, no better off up here than down there. Speaking of down there, looks like they’ve now caught up to when Junior was grasping at the air, throwing blind shots at what kinda music the spirit of Sears wants to listen to. He’s reminded of weary travelers marching through knee-deep snow, lantern held true. The one human influence in a neutral uncaring natural. Run DMC backwards sounds kinda cool, also.

“Ritchie told—”

“Rewinding,” Otto is ready to finish. “You’re already doing it. Right now, your brain is still acclimated to the standard passage. That’ll change. You’re gonna ask how it would change, and that’s because while Wishkah is a big place, there’s a lack of unique stimuli that, compounded, remaps how you perceive the flow of time. Sometimes right here you tell me to stop interrupting you and just let the questions happen. To that I say no. For you, all these questions are new. To me, I know every one of them, word by word.”

“Do I ever say something unique?”

“Yeah.”

“... Did I *just* say something unique?”

“Last time the word you used was *different*. ‘*Do I ever say something different?*’ You’ve also said unique, too, but that one’s rare. You’re about to ask where we’re going, and it’s somewhere I know you haven’t seen before now.”

“But I have seen it,” Junior finishes this time. “I just don’t

remember.”

“Correction: you did remember. In fact it would be wrong in all cases to say you remember or forget anything, going forward. You either currently know or do not know anything based on the moment in current you happen to be. This close to the end, you’re at your stupidest.”

Total word salad. “Thanks.”

“Let your mind wander. Something might happen.”

So Otto *is* a normal person. Letting the mind wander is something only normal people do (normal in a vacuum, as it pertains to this experiment). Minds like Junior’s are either wandering or marching in uniform depending on star position, tea leaves, which way the smoke blows. Gotta be up to someone other than him and, broadly speaking, what’s *that* guy’s end-game? Does he think this is funny? Watching Junior dottle off and think about cartoons that don’t exist anymore and those awful key lime pie yogurts—why were those always in the fridge? Who was eating them? Yeah, Junior was, but it’s not like they were lousy with corn syrupy snacks like some of the other families. Funny. Actually, it’s funny. Somewhere sometime he’d given his mom or dad the impression he liked those key lime pie yogurts despite the truth he both does not like them nor does he totally understand what key lime pie is. Must’ve been cheap. At the store. He’s not a yogurt eater by volition. He means nothing by it but that’s like a girl breakfast. With the granola. No, no, the cereal with the dry strawberries. It’s otherwise horse oats but those six or seven strawberries they cut up and dry out are divine. Wonder if they—no, they definitely sell dried strawberries on their own. At Whole Foods or something. Next to the juice that costs too much. A loyal Wholefoodser would say it’s reasonably priced, all labor and manufacturing costs considered. That and it wouldn’t have to be so bad if healthy food was subsidized. Is he using that word right? Oh, what was that juice with the little round gremlin on the front? Acronym. POG! That was it. Passion Orange Grape-

fruit. Elite among juices. Bordering on candy, which, given fruit isn't too far—well, it's not *added* sugars. Ah! Excuse him. Passion Orange *Guava* was the concoction. He's never had a guava before. Like, on its own. POG is his only frame of reference and it's in a triple threat ladder match with the passion fruit and the orange. We all know how dominant the orange can be. Still loses out to the banana, obviously. Throw a banana in the smoothie and it's gonna beat the fuck out of every other fruit in that blender. Good lord, banana flavored things. Wishkah used to have a Sanrio store. A retail store for Sanrio. Hello Kitty, Tuxedosam, the other one that's also a cat, the one with the floppy ears. The frog. You ask why he can't remember these popular characters but knows Tuxedosam by name. Memory is a fragile thing. Junior's lost the thread of this. What was he just... what was he just about to say. Go back. Smoothies. Bananas are the most overpowering flavor in the fruit kingdom next to what everyone pretends watermelons taste like. Tuxedosam? Too far. Banana flavored things, Wishkah, Sanrio—*eureka*. Sanrio sold banana-flavored bubblegum. About M&M-sized, hard shell included. Cheap, too. And wasn't it just the bomb dot com. Tasted like banana way longer than competing brands, too. Dubble Bubble can go fuck itself. Or that's what he remembers. One day the Sanrio store just vanished. Literally. He'd been to Wishkah on successive days. Day two the lot was taped up. Sanrio does not liquidate, evidently. Hardcore. He had been thinking about that banana gum at the time. Endangered to buy more by the extinct banana flavor dancing in his sixth sense. But when he showed up, no one was home. Peeking through the glass double doors revealed an empty lease. Did the Sanrio ever exist, in spite of—nay, in direct opposition to—the history it left behind? Wait, he's not thinking about Sanrio. Like, he is, but why does this story smack of something else, hiding in the cryosleep of

Roger Szmodis. The name is a piercing through Junior's tongue. There's someone in Wishkah he hasn't seen yet. And his name is Roger Szmodis. If Otto hasn't already answered

then Junior's never asked. For some reason he takes this to mean he shouldn't.

. . .

Huh. Otto has a clubhouse.

The ceiling ventilation is the perfect spot for a secret Wishkah apartment, and a worthwhile investment should one spend a lot of time here, memorizing things. From the ground looking up, Junior imagines nothing about the covertly unscrewed, person-sized vent cover would suggest tampering. Because how would anyone tamper with something up so high? HVAC of this magnitude necessitates cranes.

From his perspective, however, it's like pulling aside a man-hole cover and entering a sewer. *Forgiveness is divine, but never pay full price for late pizza.*

Replacing the cover, Otto explains, unprompted, "A couple of trips ago I brought this grille with me. Now it sticks to the ceiling instead of falling uh..." he peeks out and looks up at the floor, "what would you call that, hm? Hundred feet? Hundred fifty?"

"Ritchie doesn't know you live in his store."

"Unlike you to think about that bedwetter. No, I don't think he does. Imagine *I'm* the variable ruining his data."

"Have I not said that before?"

"Look, I promise this'll make sense, but I need to sit down. Watch your head."

The vent shaft spills out into a central junction, sharing the dimensions of a prison cell but made homely with couches bolted in place and a Moroccan rug duct taped at the edges. A funky art project to any floorlubbers who may discover this by accident. *How odd. A studio apartment nailed to the ceiling. Really makes you think about our application of space within the confines...* regrettably that's where Junior's impression of



stuffy art people taps out. *Look. That's not usually where a couch goes. Ha-ha.*

Otto says, opening a (nailed down) ice box, "Do much yoga?"

"Wouldn't you know?"

"Excuse me, I thought I'd let the guy who lies all the time play the numbers. What was I thinking? Here:"

He underhands a glass bottle to Junior's far right. Bit of an odd transfer but he catches the bottle without error. Right in the palm.

"Nice catch! I mean, you and I have practiced that catch... quite a bit. Vintage! Take a look."

*Right now, the 16oz bottle insists, there's a new taste loose on the planet...A different kind of soft drink with a unique cola flavor. Absolutely clear, wonderfully refreshing.*

"This bottle expired in 1993," Junior points out.

"Like I said: vintage. You'll find time sensitivities matter a whole lot less from where we're standing."

Plopping down to his couch, Otto clips off his hard hat and refastens the chin strap, throwing the loop around a superglued hook where it appears to levitate upwards like a balloon. He wiggles his arms under his back, pushing himself up until his legs are up and his head is out in a J shape.

He says "Shoulder stand. We're going up but most things still wanna go down. Doing this keeps the blood pumping the way it's supposed to."

"Oh. Does that get annoying?"

"Sure does. Next you ask the pee question; do you have a pee question, by chance?"

He does. He was going to ask, considering he peed this morning, if his pee was now going to return itself, ethereally

and horrifyingly, back to his bladder. This struck him as a stupid thing to think, and he had filed it away.

“No I wasn’t,” Junior lies. “Hadn’t considered it yet.”

“Mm, except you have. And right now’s around the time to ask. Or that’s been true the last four times we’ve done this. Wouldn’t recommend lying to me, bud.”

Sorry, does he consider this an own? *Oh, you got me. I was indeed thinking about pee. How cool of you to correctly deduce that I was worried about reverse-entropy peeing. And what intuition! To base your then judgement of my character on my willingness to come out with the queries on theoretical piss physics. You’re so powerful.*

“Knowing how to leave would be nice,” Junior changes the subject.

“Just getting to that, man. Good news and bad news. Good news? There’s a way out of... all this. Bad news? You have to go alone. I’ll tell you where to go but you need to go yourself.”

“You mean you aren’t coming?”

“Sooner or later, yes, I’m coming. If you’re worried about my temporal well-being, don’t be. I trust you don’t need me to tell you I know this Rewind business inside and out. We shall both have our vine and fig tree, but... indulge me, will you?”

He shakes his bottle, beckoning both of them to drink. Before his sip, Otto holds his bottle aloft:

“To strong transfer windows and the immortal Wishkah shopping center,” he waxes.

To Junior’s surprise, the soda hadn’t gone flat. In fact, one might say what he got is purely the best – all natural flavors, no preservatives, no caffeine, and no artificial flavors. Something to that effect.

“What do you mean by transfer window?”

“Mm,” Otto hums mid-sip. “You had gone through the base-

ment at the precise moment Wishkah went down. Luck is on your side—that’s the *only* time you can open the door, aided by the urgency with which you hurled yourself through the door. No peeking, no hesitation. Did everything right.”

“How do you know what I did? Have I told you?”

“No, but you’re here right now instead of in ribbons beneath a few gigatons of concrete, so... well done on that front. Got yourself most of the way there, now there’s only the reorientation.”

Rolling to his feet, Otto draws Junior’s attention to the blueprints on his wall. “Floor plan,” he says, rapping a thumb on the topmost portion. “Vintage. ‘73. I’ll snag this from the administrators in a few decades. We are here, designated Suite 1 as it happens, and you transitioned from orthodox flow to Rewind *here*—the geographic epicenter. Now, that was all the way at the bottom, so logically...”

“O-oh, was I supposed to finish?”

“And yet you never do. Your way out is at the very tippy top. Now, listen carefully, because this is the only way you can reset yourself. You will be back to riding the tides of time the normal way, now with enough of the stuff to spare that you can get outta dodge before the building collapses. But! Huge—Oh my god, Becky. You need to run through this hall the exact same way you ran through the first. Full tilt, no reservations, no peeking, total send. Anything less and things get real bad. So bad I’m afraid I can’t save you.”

“Is that what you do around here?”

“Save people, you mean? Forgive the brag but I do a lot more around here than save people. I save this building. Wishkah sits on a quite unstable sliver of Earth, I think that goes without saying. Call me the lighthouse keeper. I keep the natural order in working order. Otherwise all this goes away. Poof. The universe would rather rid itself of anomalies than sort things out, handing me the unenviable position of guiding peo-

ple like you.

“Cool.”

“You always think it’s cool,” Otto says. Well! You need to be on your way, I have other *wayward souls* to assist—”

“Like the bartender girl?”

“Sure, yeah, her—among others. Get a move on, we’ll be in touch sooner than you think.”

Urgent enough that Junior needs to be on his way, get a move on, but not so much so he can’t finish his drink, it seems. He bottoms out his share, meekly carrying the trash with him out the ventilation center when Otto calls out behind him, “hey.”

“What?”

“Are you... just, are you sure you can’t remember doing this before?”

“Have I left before?”

“No, it’s not that, you do successfully leave, I mean... none of this? None of it?”

There was that name but nothing more remarkable. “I don’t remember any of this,” Junior says.

“Okay. Forget it, then. You need to get out of there. Exactly the way I told you: food court, door at the far end, stairs, long hallway, run and run and hit the door. Close your eyes. Capiisce?”

Part of Junior really hates that patronizing, *do you understand* genre of instructions. Another part has never known what someone is supposed to say to kapeesh.

“Kapoosh.”

. . .

Administrative offices are out of the way on purpose.

Kept bare and purely functional. These are places of work, not fun, thus so much as a flowerpot is a rarity. That said, Junior's ready for Wishkah's administrative offices to be especially dehydrated. For a few years there, right at the end, all anyone met up there to do was remind each other the money was gone. What flower could live somewhere so lunar.

Shopping malls aren't a set-it and forget-it investment nor are they collected under a retail electorate (would the anchors get more votes?). A Triple Five Group or a Westfield must be keeping these tenants in check, and Wishkah's legal business guardian was Mendel, Doppler, and Company (MDCo), a private equity with investments primarily in shopping and entertainment. Their Wikipedia page is sparsely detailed, their biggest investments of the past twenty-four years since being sold off to bigger, hungrier equities.

Normal folks could catch a rare glimpse of these MDCo representatives in their rooftop offices and meeting rooms as they disembark the offramp (hint: look right through the trees on the passenger side). It was that glass cube braced by triangular beams, an exterior feature otherwise unused and unseen by shoppers. The Panopticon. MDCo had a view right down to the atrium and the food court on one side, and if they kicked their roller chairs all the way to the other side they'd look down on the Pantheon. A view like that must make a man feel like a winner. Clerks watch the shoppers and managers watch the clerks and supervisors watch the managers and MDCo representatives watch the supervisors and men with greased up hair watch the MDCo representatives from New York offices. Easy to forget that last party is watching. But you shouldn't.

Junior's destination is not the MDCo offices but that's the direction he's headed all the same. Figures they'd build their fort right next to the river's mouth. Which is also the river's basin. Please disregard the simile. Or the metaphor. The allegory? Junior's nervous about what comes next.

Alone, he's free to ponder what walking around the mall

from this perspective has been like, logistically. Easier than one would assume, stuck the wrong way. With eyes trained to the mirrors five paces ahead one can imagine themselves right side up. Slowly and consistently his shifting guts relax. He's not needed to use a door, yet, but at the employees-only service stairs opposite the central squeeze of the food court, just where Otto had told him to go, he finds a door that seems to be ready for his arrival, his need. A two-way, push only flap, twelve feet tall floor to acting floor. He's reminded of restaurant kitchen doors opened backfirst. He passes through the heavy flap back-first, as is tradition.

Beyond that is the kind of aggressively gray and incomplete concrete stairwells mall visitors nationwide should know well. These aren't spaces for hanging out; they're for passing through as quickly as possible. Pay no attention to the pipes and the labels, those aren't for normal people to think about. It's just that it's hard to not think about when they all stop cold at the top of the first flight.

From here on, Junior descends what is only stairs. The mathematical perfection of steps, free of even the suggestion humans would be using them. Down he goes. Down and down and down. Further down than makes sense, and Junior starts to feel that same primal unassuredness he'd felt when descending to the basement. Different now being the means of access. Whereas an elevator suggests someone smarter than Junior knows what's ahead and laid out the most obvious path forwards, stairs require a manual risk. Every step is one he needs to want. And after a half dozen flights, he's not sure if it's one he wants.

Still, there's at least one person left who knows what comes next. Nearly to an annoying degree. If Otto says this is what Junior needs to do to get off the ceiling, that's what he'll do. And this time he'll watch Wishkah fall from a safe distance. The parking structure, maybe.

Finally, the stairs end. He stands at the top of the switchback

and looks down between the railings. He'd started at floor two, yes, but this far up would seem to put him on floor fourteen. That look at the roof of the mall one can steal coming off the offramp never included a crow's nest. Whatever. Slash it from his mind. Otto says this is what Junior needs to do.

He kneels to tie his boots taut to his ankles. Running in these is always tough and he's gonna need his best stride possible if he's taking this glowing red TIXE door like Otto instructed. Exactly like the basement door, this. Softly descending hallway and all. Just as he'd said, the push bar on the push door encourages high velocity pushing. Junior pulls his vest straight. Catch you on the flip side, Otto.

Junior starts his run, picking up the pace a third of the way down in case this isn't fast enough. Should he fasten his helmet? Last time gravity flipped he thought he landed awkward on his shoulder. So now he's pulling down on his chinstrap, running harder and harder with a hand outstretched to catch the push bar. Should he shoulder ran this football-style? Otto had told him to shut his eyes. The last five seconds are performed blind.

. . .

Junior's fingers slide back and forth on the push bar. His feet throb in his boots, uncomfortable with running in those big clumsy things. He'd stopped right at the door.

But why? The thought rope-a-dopes him. Something to do with the moment he'd squeezed his eyes shut. Right then he knew he would stop.

Up on the floor. Five seconds worth of running behind his back. The fluorescents he's been running over made a reflection in some tiny artifact. One speck of unnaturalness gave him pause. Back five seconds worth, he looks up and sees a gold coin.

Hopping up, Junior snatches the coin off the floor, examining the imprint and wondering how a Planet 16 token would





Looking down at a blue sky makes his inner ear spasm and he shuts the door. Blood gushes down from his head like his circulatory system takes a breath for lack of lungs. Otto wanted him to fall to his death.

But while Junior shakily ascends the steps something else begins to bother him. It takes another three flights to put it into words, what's so wrong about going down these stairs and it's not doing it upside-down. No, it's that he is using the stairs. He is and has been using the stairs. The stairwell is double sided like scotch tape and he is using the stairs.

Junior ascends back down to the twelve foot food court flap, on the stairs he's been using, and notices another door. Colored the same boring grey as the walls he'd missed it the first time completely. Speakeasy style, with MDCo / oOQIW etched sharply on the front. Could've forgotten he was on the ceiling and nothing in the stairwell would refute this. Just like the food court this door is extra tall, stretched out to touch the floor and ceiling with no significant threshold. A surgically tight bezel.

His hands sting in sweat, crawling up the nape of his neck. If he's about to enter the offices of MDCo, he takes these double sided stairs and extra tall doors to mean they expect people coming in from the ceiling.

Pardon his French, but Oscar Mayer has a way with T-H-E-F-U-C-K.

Junior knocks—*why did he just knock?*

“Come in,” an old man answers promptly, muffled.

“Uh... Roger Szmodis?”

“Yes,” he says, muffled behind the big metal door. “The one and only. Inside, please; those stairs scare the bejeezus out of me.”

Second the motion. Junior creeps inside, thankful the space isn't nearly as secret society creepshow as he'd been imagining (blackout curtains, cloaks, a sigil or two). Exactly what a shop-

ping and entertainment equity would ask an architect for: big wide windows generous enough to reveal both the blue sky above the mall and the ant farm shoppers below.

Just invert the orientation for now. Blue sky below, floor above, et cetera. Is Junior supposed to do it every time.

He's nervous, but since a guy with a cane—who couldn't react to a dislodged windowpane even if he wanted to—is at this moment casually pacing the infinity floor, well, he doesn't wanna look like the wimp. If there's a way of telling how safe it is to walk on glass, then add it to the list of things Junior doesn't know. Feels thick enough. Thicker than glass people wouldn't be touching should be, he thinks. As if someone knew this big skylight would need to support the weight of several humans.

"How are you holding up, Junior?"

"I think my friend just tried to get me killed."

Beat. Roger coughs. "... Now would be the time" is where he settles, taking his eyes off the deep blue sea below his feet. "Good morning, Ryobi. Oh, no, pardon me, that was someone else. You're..."

"Junior—"

"Junior! Yes, thank you. And excuse me."

Figures. "You know my name because I've met you already," Junior checks.

"That's the conundrum," Roger half-answers. "It's hard to remember the sequence of events at my age. Please be patient and feel free to correct me if my... *ducks* are out of row. I suppose we're only meeting for the first time now. Speaking objectively. But I remember meeting you more than ten times, and correct me if I'm wrong, but you can only meet somebody once. Would you agree?"

Cool. Another residual Wishkah denizen who talks like this.

“I’m meeting you for the first time,” Junior states as fact. “I came back to Wishkah to see what’s in the basement. One more trip before it was gone forever. I walked inside, walked out, I was on the ceiling and watching myself, on the floor, repeating everything I had just done only backwards. Everyone is moving backwards.”

“You’re close,” Roger cuts him off early, an old finger stretched out, “you’re *real* close, Junior. Small correction: *you* are the one who is moving backwards. All of us, regretfully stuck up top like this. First time? Visiting the basement?”

“You tell me.”

Roger is struck with a laugh. “How about *you* tell *me*? Your experience is your own. Language is an old invention; ill-equipped for what is happening to us, Junior. Believe me I would love to illuminate for you everything you’ve been seeing. But I’ve been up here who knows how long, collectively, waiting for someone to do *me* that courtesy. The boy Otto seems to me the only one close to getting this all in a line, but you’ve cottoned to his brand of trickster wisdom.”

Sure, let’s call murder a trick. “I was about to fall into space when I found your token. Guess technically you’ve saved my life.”

“Ah,” Roger maybe smiles, beckoning Junior closer. “I’m honored you’d think me your savior. Except I did not leave that token in that death chamber. I’ve never been to either corner of this place.”

“Oh,” Junior says.

“Mhmm, doesn’t make a lick of sense, does it?” Roger adds, thank god. “Let’s work this out between ourselves, then: how did you arrive at my name?”

Fat chance this old guy in the suit knows what the fuck a Hello Kitty is. “I was thinking about a store,” Junior doesn’t lie, “inside the mall, years ago. Pretty important but suddenly—”

“Suddenly disappeared,” Roger finishes. “Is there a ghost of a chance you’ve heard my name already? Removed from this... shopping center. Follow baseball, much?”

“No.”

Why does Roger look disappointed? Is he from a time where that’s all strangers talked about with each other? “You’re familiar with your home team all the same,” he says, opening his arms. “*Ladies and Gentlemen, your Seattle Mariners.*”

“Sure, yeah.”

“Recall the story of who gave them their name?”

Well now Junior feels bad. Is he supposed to know? The way Roger’s burying the lede Junior has to assume he’s got something to do with it. Old enough to have been involved, if it’s not rude to say.

Shit, what’s a scenario open enough that Roger can finish the thought but still sounds like Junior knows the full story?

“The name...” Junior throws himself in the deep end, “was decided... because of the harbor?”

“Seattle’s proud industry,” Roger concludes, “is more or less how I worded things.”

“*You* came up with it,” Junior enunciates like he already knew. “When you worked for the team.”

“No, no, I was never *involved*,” Roger says. Dammit. “Beyond my fandom. Rather, the franchise called on citizens of the county to give that bastard child a name. Open contest, all you needed was a hell of a name and a hell of a reason. Let me be frank: I love the city, and I love baseball. To that end I could accept nothing less than epithetical perfection.”

“Mariners is a pretty good name,” Junior says. “Iconic,” he adds to be nice.

“Thank you kindly but I did not arrive at such a brilliant

name quickly. Moreover, the name they used to have always... troubled me. It wasn't good enough, to be out with it."

"What original name?"

"For the Mariners or Seattle baseball? Steelheads in the Negro League, Pilots before Rainiers, Rainiers before Harbormasters."

"Harbormasters?"

Roger pauses. He grins. "You really have no clue who I am, then?"

"Sorry."

"Don't be. You're functionally a newcomer. You're from the *outside*, you don't have a damn clue what's been going on in here and you've *been* here half that time. And you don't remember the old version of history where your home team was the Seattle Harbormasters. Do you?"

"Cross my heart, they've always been the Mariners."

"In seventy-six, I send my letter to the franchise. It wins. Ladies and Gentlemen, your Seattle Harbormasters.

"And that was that" Roger goes on, beckoning Junior to follow along as he paces, "but I couldn't shake the sense I had dealt my team a poor hand. Below .500, thirty years straight. Our only record. No Kid, no Suzuki, no Felix. None of your heroes, not in this version of events. The Harbormasters are laughingstocks. They would have a lot of nerve to dream of playoff contention. In 2003 the franchise is sold to up the river, eventually reentering the MLB as the Vancouver Shooners. And you know what? They *make* playoffs—"

Apologies in advance. Junior has to cut the old man off. "You're saying things used to be one way and you made them another?"

Glad to see Junior ahead of him on this, Roger licks his lips. "Let's say one day years and years ago I'm doing a little Christ-

mas shopping for my grandkids. These shopping malls... can't stand the size. All the floors, the walking, it's not good on my knees. Add to this the confounding layout of the place. I go downstairs. Didn't know they had a downstairs! News to me! But everything down there is wrong. Not only wrong but constrictive. I went down in 2009 and when I came back up it was 1975. The mall was celebrating its two-year anniversary. I had hair—"

"You went back," Junior finishes again, excited, "and you tried fixing the team!"

Roger snaps his fingers, delighted. "Attack the problem at the root. Somehow my poor name was to blame for all my team's failures. I just knew. And when you cause a problem, at least in my time, you rolled up your sleeves and you fixed the thing. I return to my desk, and I send a different letter. Ladies and Gentlemen, your Seattle Battleships."

... Seriously? Junior doesn't say it out loud, but... really? Seattle Battleships? Props to the alliteration but, what, did he go so far back he came out twelve years old?

"They had the shipyard up in Bremerton," Roger explains, noticing the name has bombed. "At the time I thought some hair on the chest would do the team good. Position play on the Harbormasters always suffered."

"And what about your old self?"

"My old self explained to me what was going on! Handed me a note, insisted on changing the name. Told him I'd change it, and poof. Roger was gone. But Roger was still here."

"I see," Junior doesn't see. "Did the Battleships do any better?"

"We got Griffey this time," Roger sighs. "Other than that, can't say I turned our fortunes around. I did make some very lucky bets on the World Series, this go-around."

Holy shit, he Biff Tannened. "Obviously you went back

again.”

“The money was nice, but... aw, I’m sure you can relate to the feeling. Two or three more tries and I’d deliver Seattle a World Series team. But it was on me to deliver the best name possible.”

It now dawns on Junior that this man has spent upwards of two centuries deliberating the best possible name for the Seattle Mariners. As in, two-hundred years to decide on *Mariners*. As the name for a baseball team next to a harbor. He will not point this out.

“Your old self disappeared,” Junior repeats. “And you were okay with that?”

“What’s not to be okay with? Wasn’t me.”

“But it was.”

“No one remains who they are for very long, Junior.”

“... So you might change the name again.”

“I may yet, don’t tempt me. Mariners should’ve made playoffs last season and I’m thinking maybe the Ironclads would have.”

He’s paused. Paused for effect? Is he testing out *Seattle Ironclads* on Junior? Should Junior tell him it’s a dumb name? What the fuck’s an Ironclad?

“I dunno, I like Mariners.”

“Well, you would. The Junior I know doesn’t like change. *Resents it*, I’d say. It’s what makes him unique among the wayward Mall Walkers. The rest of us came here to become something but not you. You came to stay something.”

“No, I came here—”

“To see the place one last time, I know. But you never leave. It’s not my place to tell your story for you but you seem to have trouble remembering the details. Want to know why?”

“Because Otto kills me?”

Roger starts then stops. He has a few options for how to proceed and it seems he needs more time to pick one than he thought. “Forgive the unsolicited advice,” Roger says, “but this place isn’t good for you. I’ve beaten around that fact in meetings past but this time I think you need to leave. Without a concrete goal your mind rots. Would you like to remember the way out?”

“Did I know how last time?”

“Funny. No you did not. Once upon a time, however, you might have. I’d look around for more of those tokens. Remember where you might have already seen one?”

His head a CERN, brain cells spinning at some close percent the speed of light, he discounts most of his questions as stupid and useless. What he wants is an old man’s reassurance.

He asks, “will I remember soon?”

“Maybe seeing it again will jog your memory.”

“I don’t know if I can wait or avoid the guy trying to kill me for that long.”

“Who says waiting must be slow? I’ve pioneered a kind of meditation, Junior. Makes the years fly by—or come sooner, in our case. Otto never cared to learn. He’s an ‘in the moment’ man as I’m sure you know. Since he often kills you before we meet you’ve never had the chance to learn for yourself. How about that? Something I’ve never told you.”

“Shoot.”

“When you get back downstairs, I want you to sit, legs crossed, and just stare at the mirrors. Let your mind wander.”

“That’s it?”

“In this environment, spacing out does some crazy things.”

“Well, there’s something I know how to do. Finally. And



you say that's gonna speed up time?"

"In a rudimentary sense. Works for me, if no one else. Don't worry about Otto in the interim, I know he has his own space where he... wastes time."

Saying their goodbyes, Junior stops in the doorway, as glad as he thought he'd be to get off the skylight. "*Hey, one more thing!*"

Roger's all ears.

"Uh... what about Seattle Fishmongers?"

"Oh, but *Ironclads* is lousy."

. . . .

Planet 16 sounds like a Shop-Vac swallowing a spilled bag of marbles.

Reverb coming first still needs some getting used to but Junior's surprise skill at Daytona USA is just as impressive in reverse. Least now he knows this comes from more practice than he knew he had. Kind of eerie, watching this unfold from the ceiling, perched batlike above the heads of the congealed south and north crews. So many details one misses when focusing on the road. Like how Tristan keeps feeling his own heartbeat and ~~Danny~~ Simon picks at his wasp sting. He and a north crew boy pass a vape back and forth (OH!).

Junior should get moving but he's distracted by the attract mode of the Crazy Taxi cabinet he'd turned on. The high scores appear onscreen in a single tick then scroll down, which is wrong on a primal level. Congratulations to number one high score BOB, whoever the hell.

The shadowy part of Planet 16 still gives Junior the creeps. His flashlight is on before he thinks of the ramifications. For example, the Junior from a few hours ago seeing this flashlight, squinting his eyes and visoring himself against the glare. Shit. And he had waited until Junior was away from the prize coun-

ter before flashing. But memory prevails. He doesn't remember seeing a stark, ceiling-glued, rewind version of himself. Only the light.

Good, he thinks, slipping inside the little storage room. The cabinet drawer is left open. Thanks, Austin. Dropping the green Planet 16 keycard inside, he feels a weight lift from his shoulders that may just be placebo. They'll never know what we sacrifice, those forwardmovers. But that's the point, ain't it? All we may do is guide them the right way. With flashlight signals and whiteboard notes that Otto has surely already left nope no he didn't where is the note there's no note.

Retrace the steps. He enters Planet 16. He travels to the unlit portion of the arcade. He meets the north crew. He sees the flashlight. He goes to the prize counter storage room. He sees the note. Now reverse it: See the note, enter storage room, see light, meet north crew, travel to unlit portion, enter arcade. Where in that process could Otto have written the note, other than absolutely prior? Unless Junior is the one who wrote the note, but that can't be true. Otto said he wrote the note. He would know better than Junior, who does not remember—forget it. He'll write the note now and tell Otto about the hiccup later. Must be one of those paradox corrections he'd been warned about. Note to self: check if you have blond hair, check the weather in Baton Rouge, and the third thing.

Oh god, what did the note say. Does perfect word for word matter? Or can he just give himself the gist? If he was just inside this room, what note did he read? Oh shit! And that thing he needs so he can more efficiently lie to the north crew! He's sweating and it's quite uncomfortable because one moment there's sweat on him and then the beads are sucking back up inside his pores. A bad feeling.

A token jammed in the rubber threshold of Daytona USA's leftmost screen. He rolls his fingers over the coin in the geographic center of his palm. Should he carry this with him in case the memory doesn't activate? No, no, he needs to see it in

just a few minutes. If he kept the token then Junior would never see the token thus the memory of seeing and wanting the token will be erased, right? Oh, but he remembers seeing the token, still, so obviously he NOTE TO JUNIOR LEFTOVER CABINETS POSE RISK OF EXPLOSION. REPORT TO ROB, AS ANY MEMBER OF THE NORTH CREW WOULD KNOW TO DO IN THIS CASE. ƆЯAƆYƎK ɹNOCƎS ƎHT ƆAƆ ƆAƆ ƆAƆ ƆAƆ.

hƆyooƆ—oops—Booyah.

Back in the closet, marker in his hand, he feels a dance of the nerves and trusts the motions. Calligraphy.

NOTE TO JUNIOR

LEFTOVER CABINETS POSE RISK OF EXPLOSION.

REPORT TO ROB, AS ANY MEMBER OF THE NORTH CREW WOULD KNOW TO DO IN THIS CASE.

ƆЯAƆYƎK ɹNOCƎS ƎHT ƆAƆ ƆAƆ ƆAƆ ƆAƆ

Right as he turns to leave, careful to put the marker exactly where it ought to be, he gets the stinging sensation something's missing. Something from the note. One addendum wouldn't hurt.

NOTE TO JUNIOR

LEFTOVER CABINETS POSE RISK OF EXPLOSION.

REPORT TO ROB, AS ANY MEMBER OF THE NORTH CREW WOULD KNOW TO DO IN THIS CASE.

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. . .

Junior has spent a lot of time wishing he'd been doing something instead of what he was doing, which most of the

time was nothing. Being a bar regular is high on that list, pre-dating this trip to Wishkah as well as the age where he could legally be a bar regular.

Billy Joel fed him a lie. Making love to tonic and gin is such a cool way to describe what's supposed to be a pathetic man. Prior to the son playing him a memory he must've entered the bar like he owned the place. Plopped down on the stool he always takes and is always open. The bartender who knows who he is (imagine being so chummy) makes that tonic and gin thing wordless because that's his usual. Oh, to have a usual. To be expected somewhere. To know what tonic is.

Exactly once, he'd been out drinking. His twenty-first birthday. That he wishes he'd been drinking underage doesn't need to be said. He and his family had gone to this restaurant they'd always been going to. Since there were landline phones. Both his parents and the waitress made this a bigger deal than Junior wanted it to be. The saucer with the pint of Rainier, sharing space with the slab of birthday cake. He didn't select the drink. He'd like the watering hole to already know what he wants, with at best a confirmational finger waggle which he could answer with a roll of the fingers and a grimace. *Long day, huh?* He definitely didn't want his *parents* there, for Christ's sake.

Bad place to find out he doesn't like beer. The adults in his life made it sound awesome. The sip he had stolen when he was ten must have only registered as good when garnished with debauchery. Sixteen ounces all to himself was too much. But, what, he was gonna deny his parents an audience with his first legal drink? Yes. If that was an option. Or maybe they meet halfway and he enters a real bar on his own that his parents had phoned ahead of time. *Tell the server to start on a tonic and gin the moment he sits down. No, don't talk to him. Make it like he's always there, ordering tonics and gins. No, he's not a Make-A-Wish kid. Yes, like from the song.*

So beer wasn't good. The following Christmas he had a glass of wine with dinner and that was even worse. A toxic un-

dulation of rotten fruits and, what, *cask*? Adults want their drinks to taste like wood? Did no one think to warn him about the distinguished adult drink that tastes like getting a pair of boots in the mail? He'd excused himself to the bathroom at what happened to be the exact moment his uncles unsheathed the girlfriend question. Unfortunate timing, because he did seriously need to throw up.

Despite that hollow fantasy of being a bar regular, the one Billy Joel has never answered for, the absurdity of Kiki Mauna Lewis' existence, location, and longevity supersedes ignorance where it concerns drinking. Even the fantasy Disneyland land which appeals to adults with the beach bum brain wrinkle. Should he... would it be gauche to order a drink? Maybe Kiki Mauna Lewis' holdout soldier would appreciate the patronage.

Junior peeks his head inside the baffling tiki bar at the exact time he realizes he's immune to the sandy floor. Victory! As he steps onto the bar's ceiling, now a briar patch of interweaving garlands and those glass balls in the nets (he still doesn't know the name), he's laughing triumphantly. No more sand getting in his boots. Only the small grains cracking under them.

Jumpscare: "Feeling guilty about your theft, you thief?"

First fear, then confusion. He doesn't remember... oh. Looks like he does still have the puka shells. In his Wishkah shlep the necklace had found its way under his shirt. Pulling it back out, he's reminded of soldiers ripping off their dog tags. Handing them to his lover before he goes and takes a mortar shell to the sternum. She will wear them to her dying days, gazing off on the horizon, looking up at the moon and imagining her love from so many years ago looking at the same moon at the same time, something they can still share and never be divided by

"You okay dude?"

"Uh, sorry, I just got distracted." Junior says, finding the same bartender girl from before, sat crisscross on the ceiling

right above where she'd be standing behind the counter, studying, as he clips off the puka shells and replaces them on the wallnail. "Just setting back up the bowling pins," he answers, feeling clever with the comparison.

"Hm," she says, "what for?"

"For the... for the past. So past me can get the necklace."

"Has past you gotten the necklace yet?"

His eyes fall to the fallen door. "Yeah, by now he must've."

"Then it's already settled. Some crimes can't be taken back. The scars fade yet they remain."

... Song lyrics? Junior's drawing a blank. "Just a drop of water in an endless sea."

"Hm?" she squeaks. Good question.

"I've uh..." he changes the subject, pulling the picture frame off the wall and unclipping the posterboard back. "Obviously I found the basement," he adds.

"Congrats," she says, earnestly. "How did you find all the... the swipecys?" She pantomimes the swiping motion.

"Had some help."

"Well done putting yourself out there. I get turtle from you. Your spirit animal is a turtle."

"Are turtles—"

"Shy? Duh. They go inside their shell. Like this."

She rolls over in her own lap. "Here's what I get from you," she answers, muffled. "All turtled up. Look at your shoulders."

Absurd suggestion. She must be one of those self-fashioned empathats. Junior'll have her know his shoulders are stiff for different reasons and he's dropped them just now for even differenter reasons. "I do have to get a move on, but I wanted to check back in."

“Ah. Well thanks for thinking about me?”

Fuck, did he say something wrong? This counts as saying something wrong to Junior, making something think he'd been thinking about them. And he had, but—ugh. Nightmare. He should go. He takes the puka shells back, returning the painfully nineties thing to his neck.

Back turned, finagling with the weird magnet-slash-latch thing, he freezes.

“So, what was in the basement?”

“... Don't you know?”

“Maybe once but it beats the hell outta me now. That was a long time ago.”

the he just now literally right

“I... just went through,” he reiterates, turning. “Just a while ago. I'm moving backwards. Rewind. *Right now*. Same as you.”

“Hmm...” she seems to feign consideration, her mind already made up. “We're moving backwards? Right now? You and I?”

“That's what the basement is,” he stresses. “You should know. You've just been through. We are on the ceiling.”

“Officer, I've been here the whole time. Haven't left my post. I got a shift to pull,” she snorts.

Junior removes the coin from the picture frame, holds it between two knuckles. “Are you sure.”

“Scout's honor.”

“You haven't left, even once.”

“I may have stepped outside for some air, but I don't see why the managers need to know that part.”

“... When was it you said you'd been to the basement? Or

when you think you may have been?”

“I’ve worked here a long time—I mean, relative to being a college student. Y’know how it is. Every sliver of your life feels longer when you’ve lived less life. Five times fast: *lived less life, lived less life, lived*—guess it’s not that hard. *Um...* one time the day manager took me aside and asked how I liked the job. A little impromptu performance review, methinks. I tell him it’s my favorite job I’ve ever had. Which is not a lie but it’s not like there’s much competition. It’s between this, Subway, a different Subway, and the concession stand. High school. Football games, Cheer meets, et cet. He thanks me for my honesty and says I’m ready for some bigger responsibilities. And I groan, because like... who wants more responsibilities, really? Right around there is when he showed me the basement. Says all the most important mall workers do secret special business down there. But I don’t remember it being a very cool place. Very dull.”

“Short hallway? Door with a knob?”

“Door with a knob! How weird is that? Too residential for a place where big business gets done. It should be like a kitchen door, huh?”

“... You remember nothing past that door.”

“Zilch,” she says with confidence.

“Do you remember your manager’s name?”

“Duh. Young guy. Lotta ambition. He didn’t *own* the place but he did run the place. Like the navy, they say—figures, the history of tiki culture—”

“Was his name Otto?”

“Yeah, why, know him from somewhere?”

. . .

At eighteen years old, four years is twenty-four percent of your life. At fifty years old, four years is just eight percent.



Were Junior to be tested, every year on his birthday, to sit still and wait one minute, he thinks that minute he'd have to wait would change. It would get shorter.

What he's about to do, fundamentally, is time travel. Concentrate his lack of unique stimuli in such a way that the lived experience of time is shortened to virtual lightspeed. Is what he's been doing the past few hours *not* time travel? If he ever knows for sure, one way or the other, he'll come back and say so.

The Pantheon ceiling. Deathly quiet, now past the point of the demolition team's entrance. Junior locks eyes with his copy in the mirror.

"When I was six, I walked the Wishkah floor at a rate of two feet per tile. When I was ten it was one and a half feet. At thirteen, two tiles per foot. Sixteen, three tiles per foot. It's one hundred and eighty-three tiles from one side to the other—"

Oops. He started talking to himself, spitting empty mnemonic hoodoo because the silence of the unexplored mall was giving him the creeps. Best not to, when his assassin is still on the loose.

Was he putting too much faith in Roger? Here he was, where the old man told him to be, doing what he told him to do, because the dangerous guy is somewhere else he told him he would be. And he'd do the uncertainty and doubt shuffle a few more steps if there wasn't something to entrancing about the mirror's reflection of stillness. Strike it from his mind. As if Otto's the type to keep friends close.

It's going to be the earliest memory of Wishkah he has, Roger said. There's his end of the line. He doesn't know what that is right now but hopes it'll come to him subconsciously. After that it's another longform meditation session to opening day, and to the resetting of his entopic clock. And probably more meditating.

Kapoosh.

His arms fall limp at his sides.

When you look up, all you see is people looking down.

Guess he's starting now? He's starting now.

Hmm... the floor. Legitimately letting his mind wander is gonna be tough. Easier said than done when actively hiding from a *liar*. What would be graver than the harmless lies Junior does sometimes? Black lies? No, no, he'd never. Capital L Lies. The kind that keeps bartenders wiping the counter permanently. He'll get her out of that, somehow. When they're moving the normal way. Oh, stop thinking about what's already happened or what may happen yet. Roger told him to let his mind wander. He doesn't wanna do this *raw*, does he? Let every second untick by. *Scit scit scit*... horror show. Shady as Otto may be, irresponsible where it concerns tiki bartenders, Junior's glad to have a Wishkah basement journeyman as his sword master. Otherwise he'd have exited Wishkah shopping center and missed the bus stop, instead taking the backroad to... The Twilight Zone. *BUM-BUM-BUM-bum-bum-bum*. What was the one they watched in school? The one they had to take notes on and it was way more boring than the reputation of Twilight Zon—*Time Enough at Last!* Yeah, that piece o' *shit*. How'd it go, again? Bank teller hates people and paying rent and all that. He just wants to read books all day. He gets locked in a bank vault, comes out: nuclear winter! But he's got all the books in the world. Yippee. But *oh no! Ah, shoot!* He breaks his glasses! Now he can't enjoy any of those books. The parallels to now are not lost on Junior, they just aren't landing. What would Rod say for his situation? *The next time you wander the great bazaar at suburbia, spare a thought for the youth whose teat was technicolor and whose teething was trans fats. The formative moments of their early development were planned by committee and packaged in sweat shops, focus tested and reiterated upon until they themselves were a product. More model than citizen, this generation finds themselves on a conveyor belt of lateral progress, packed tight in a commercial freight truck on urgent*

delivery to... *The Twilight Zone*. Or something. Rod was always giving you homework. *The next time you attend a monster truck rally, the next time you're on a plane to Cancun, the next time you're going back to the supermarket because you forgot bean dip*. So condescending. What's he noticing that we aren't? Well, Junior'll tell you something maybe you neglected to notice, Rod: The T in your last name. Focus on the spooky stories next time. What, we're supposed to be scared *and* learning something? One is directly handicapping the other, buddy. Hey, is *Twilight Zone* the show where—no, that's *Outer Limits*. One time his grandparents put on that show deliberately to scare him. The opening that plays like some shadow government made of human-sized centipedes has hijacked your television signal. Kids have fragile brains. Their TV channels must specify when they're transitioning from cartoons to commercial since stupid kids don't know which is which intrinsically. He sure didn't. He thought SpongeBob wanted to sell him some Floam. Whatever that is. Wait, never mind, he remembers Floam. A trillion Styrofoam beads suspended in a malleable, semisolid goop. Supposed to be a Play-Doh alternative—another foolish mortal thinking they can come for the crown. He never owned the stuff. His parents refused to buy anything that meant calling a number. Even if he did own a tub of Floam he imagined himself picking out the Styrofoam beads one by one. He wanted to see what that goop looks like stripped of its structural support. Vibrant, radioactive sludge. Bet kids ate it and that's why you can't get it anymore. Kids always eat the fun toys and get them removed from the market. Ruin all the fun. Junior's neck itches. *God*, Junior's neck itches. Jesus Christ it's a brutal one. But he's not supposed to pay it mind, he thinks. Someone told him—Roger told him. Yeah. It'll go away. Heed not the path of temptation. Even if scratching it would feel, just, *the best*.

ruof-ytnewt-eno ,ytnewt-eno ,xis-ytenin ,owt-ytneves

What was he doing?

Like a dream, Junior knows it's over the moment it's over. Give or take the five seconds watching a phantom spider climb the wall.

He's lost his focus, for sure. Instantly he's snapped back to where he was: crisscross, on the ceiling, entranced, looking down. Looking down at the oceanic mirror which in turn looks down at the Pantheon and its many tables and chairs and people walking every which X and Y. Oh.

Oh, shit, it worked.

It's work-*ing*, Junior should say. He's nowhere near his earliest memory. It'd be earlier than now, this moment whose backing track sounds like Maroon 5's *Misery*. Somehow the rare *γῤεξιM* remix is just as much an earworm as the original.

He stands, much as he imagines it would irritate Roger and his simple instructions. But, what, and miss this? Nearly looks imaginary to his starved eyes, an occupied Wishkah. In his last few visits, he doesn't remember the place looking nearly this lively, and this doesn't even look like a packed house.

Being down there could be an anxious pain, sometimes, but seeing the Wishkah procession from this view borders on emotional. Here was his community center. A place where something was always happening at times where so little was happening with himself he couldn't stand it. Observations fail him. He knows them all. Second floor Sephora, first floor Pandora, first floor Aeropostale second floor Games Workshop first floor Build-A-Bear first floor Pottery Barn second floor Zumiez second floor Edible Arrangements (odd one) first floor Victoria's Secret second floor stupid cupcake place that used to be a GameStop. He's made it back.

He walks thirty-ish paces away from the comatose Otto before falling down to his back in a snow angel, looking down on it all. From this far away he still picks up on McDonald's fries. Hardly a locked away memory but if they packaged that shit like smelling salts they'd take over the world a second time.

The way it mingles with the MSG of Panda Express and whatever mad science they're doing at Sushirito wraps him up in a blanket. He'd go to bed with this white noise pumping in his ears. Yes, even the parts with the odd baby tantrum. He knew this better than he knew his front door.

His mind keeps returning to McDonalds. Someone must have a bag nearby, though he can't spy the red boxes on any of the tables down below. There are those violently yellow Lego store bags he could call from ten miles away. The sophisticated white totes from the Microsoft store, a company so liquid they'll give anyone a laminated tote on the house. Victoria's Secret's matte pinks and blacks. Would girls not want something more discreet? No? Just let the world know you've got fresh bloomers. Knock yourselves out.

Okay, who the hell's got McDonalds and why aren't they sharing? He's just kidding, but seriously. That is downright pungent. Eau de Grimace. Literally no way that's someone way down there on the first-floor pantheon unless they want the whole state to know grease is the word and there's a fresh bag of McDanks to descend upon like zombies ripping a clumsy human to shreds. Unless they're—

Junior gets to his feet, making for the second-floor balcony, just off from the food court. Funny he smells oily McDonalds when what he should be smelling is irony blood. A custodian makes semicircles with the mop, looking at Junior like he's putting the blood there himself, slowly drawing a fat red line.

He gets closer, stopping when he can see the full trail stretch from the corner, behind the pillar, all the way to the benches by the balcony. Where it had spilled into the cracks between tiles it seems to shrink back to the trail, which itself seems to tighten up like water freezes. Following the trail from where it starts, right behind the corner pillar, to the benches, Junior sees a squad of four teenage girls, who have abandoned their McDonalds to tend to the bleeder, a poor schmuck who can't bother to pull himself off

Oh, right.

If he's still rewinding—you know what—if he's still re-winding, Junior bets he can nail the sonofabitch who tripped him in the first place. Literally what the fuck is and was and soon will be their problem. Punking this poor kid, already lousy with the jitters over this doomed promposal. One he's gonna have to do in front of all her friends (fucking nightmare). Bad news if you thought gushing blood in front of her pulled a secret sympathy card from out the sleeve and under the table. Because he's been there and no it does not. *Where is that asshole?*

Junior stomps from the balcony to around the pillar, scanning the Wishkah denizens on the floor below with Predator vision. Criminals always revisit the scene of their crime. And Junior has it on good faith his perp has no choice but to return—he's about to do it. What do we have here... a jewelry store employee watches the bleeding boy from the open corners iconic to every jewelry store ever. The janitor who appears to be painting on the blood rather than removing. The corner itself, where the trail begins, immediately after a potted plant. More pot than plant, if you ask Junior. At the time the thing would've come up to his knees and been wider than his shoulders. Adding to this is the pot had a carved-in pedestal. Sharp corners that stick out wider than the base—*is that what tripped him?*

Apologies to who he was imagining in his head (burnout teenager, beanie, hoodie, smells like cigarettes, rat moustache). We got the perp right here, chief. Wishkah's dumbass potted plants that surely must've claimed dozens if not hundreds of trips before now. He's angry, not in spite of the true cause but because of it. This promposal meant a lot to him. He did it early so he could avoid the DEFCON scenario of someone else asking her first. Someone who blurts in class and it's actually funny. Shudder. That and, like, y'know, he really did like her. Did she know? Probably. Be a teenage girl and assume every boy

your age even somewhat pleasant to you think you're hot. You'll be correct more times than you're incorrect. But that doesn't take away from the sincerity on Junior's part, he doesn't think. All of it ash in the mouth because of this stupid plant.

Whoops, Junior's hand slipped and he pulled the spanner from his belt loop and threw it down at the potted plant as hard as he could, hitting the hidden cleavage of the ceramic just right and sending fat chips across the floor with a squishy *desro*.

In a blink the blood is gone. One wipe of the eyes and the janitor is missing. The jewelry store clerk is back behind the counter. What remains is a broken plant pot with a fresh set of shoeprints through the dirt. Well that's inconsiderate. Some kid broke the plant and fled the scene. But if it were him in that position and he were young enough he supposes he'd run too. Mall cops are made more vicious by their lack of real authority.

He shrugs it off, ready to return to his Rewind when the smell of McDonalds clips him on the chin. What the hell do they put in that stuff to make just the smell an ad? Must be some industrial chemical the public isn't supposed to know about. Hmm, doesn't look like anyone on the Pantheon floor got the Mickey D's. Must be—oh! The girls on the second floor balcony just beyond the food court. One of them looks familiar.

Oh, no, he remembers this.

Senior year. Prom had just been announced the previous week. As in the theme for Prom (Gatsby), which signaled for all the Seniors the school had just entered date picking season. A stressful time for boys.

Tolo had been a complete wash, four years in a row. Any clue what that does to a boy? Four years, no Tolo-posals? Socially irrecoverable, if Junior had a reputation that came up further than the shins.

Homecoming was even worse. To love (whatever determines a good Homecoming date) is to be vulnerable (buy

posterboard). When it came time Junior couldn't move. He broke the posterboard in half over his knee and stuffed it in the dumpsters before too many people had seen him walking around. What possessed him to give up when he'd already danced the Sharpie dance he couldn't say. Rounding the corner, he'd felt his chest was about to explode. Is that not the gut he's supposed to trust?

A guidance counselor had told him he'd always regret *not* doing something more than he regret doing something *poorly*. Alright, Sun Tzu. Confucious. One of the two. Senior Prom is the last call for all romantic confessionals. After this everyone Junior knew would be going away. Even in the worst possible version of these next few seconds he'd only ever be "this weird guy" who had tried asking her out once.

Right. This is all coming back to him. He had marched up, asked if he could talk to her privately (it's Wishkah, dude, privacy *where*), she and all her friends laughed, she asked why he can't say it here, he didn't have a good reason why or really any reason, realized there's no casual way to bring up the Prom question that does not immediately stink of a Prom question, ripped it off Band-Aid style, and she said no. And of course she said no. This was poorly executed at every step.

The less he looks the better, even if seeing a younger iteration of himself in action has its allure. Doesn't look like him, not like he'd want to look. His bathroom mirror was too nice. From this perspective it's clear why that kid wasn't Prom material. The recruiter would turn him away for being flat footed. Look at his computer slouch and two days unwashed hair. Now try imagining him in the slow dance, the rocking and the having the hands on the back of his neck, his own hand wherever you're supposed to hold a girl. Embarrassing. You really gotta feel for that kid.

Junior would like to look at something else now.

He returns to the meditation circle, finding the groove faster than he thought he would; entranced, lip barely open, doubled



over shrimplike. No way Roger would ever know he'd stepped away for a second but, even if he did, he'd have some nerve getting mad about it. As if Junior messed with anything.

. . .

Back down on the ceiling, legs crossed, Junior attempts to find the trance again. Focusing on one thing and letting the mind pinball here and there seems to do the trick. He'd gotten through most of school doing the same thing. What do kids think about when they're not thinking about inertias and Stonewall Jackson, teachers and concerned parents wonder because they don't really remember sitting at those desks. For Junior it was the little things. A moth trapped in the corner bumping into nothing. Don't worry about the moth, it's not doing anything, let's get started on chapter seven. Haha, good one. Don't focus on the only thing in the classroom that's moving. Junior had eaten a moth, one time. Obviously it wasn't on purpose. Both of god's creatures were in the wrong place at the wrong time. Frankly his mom was more concerned about it than he was. Whatever the opposite of a hypochondriac is, Junior is that. As a kid he'd stare at the sun just to watch it move. He couldn't believe something that big was moving, all the time. If he took his attention away the sun would slide to the left, slide to the right, take it back now y'all, only moving when it was safe from his interest. He'd spent Prom night staring at the moon. Instead of being held at the neck and holding a girl wherever the bra isn't. Out in the parking lot, resting his chin on the open window of his car. He'd shown up anyway. The nerve of him. Kids go to these things on their own. Right? Or with friends? The guidance counselor threw him that consolation when it seemed like Junior's confidence had reached a career low. Told him a story about the cool kids who broke dress code and smoked, in the guidance counselors words, *marijuana cigarettes*. Where the hell Junior was supposed to get one of those he didn't say. Besides, you share marijuana cigarettes with friends and Junior showed up alone. Spending the next two hours working up the chutzpah to walk inside anyway, unchap-

eroned, elbows locked with nobody. In his dumb rental suit that still felt wrong. Dress pants feel too thin. In no uncertain terms he was going to love the way he looked. *They guaranteed it!* Yet here he was, watching a moon. Easier on the eyes than the sun which had defied observation all his life. He remembers picking a landmark—some trees. The branches lined up in an XY with the moon and he could observe how it moved. Up and away, the beginning of its parabola. That night was a perfect half. Split right down the middle. For the first time he saw the moon slide. He watched an ancient clock tick away past his driver's side window. He kept his focus locked the whole time, uninterrupted, and he saw the world move on without him. He never went inside. At home mom had asked how Prom went and he had said it was pretty cool. Then he went to bed.

*“Attention Wishkah speakers: could the owner of a blue 1988 Plymouth Voyager please attend to their vehicle in Lot C. Blue 1988 Plymouth Voyager, Lot C. Thank you.”*

Huh?

Junior only speaks a little Antiform. Someone really should write a conversational dictionary for this stuff. Hope that message wasn't for him.

Coming to, he finds himself, again, in the familiar Pantheon. Except for the tables down on the floor. We've gone past the soft redesign of Wishkah's interior. Used to be a greater presence of wood furnishings before the 21<sup>st</sup> century outlawed anything less than greyscale. And those new tables and chairs were just the pits. Designed against lingering, he remembers. The back rest didn't come up high enough and the tables weren't big enough. More seating? Sure, but the equation doubles back on itself. It's less seating if nobody wants it, don't you know, whoever handled this pathetic excuse for a remodel.

He'd forgotten the homeliness of these polished wood chairs. Clashed with the mirrored ceilings so low to the patron's head yet it was so northwest. Apparently much of Wishkah's fixtures were sourced from state lumber. What was he just

thinking about? Cars? Where are they?

If he was shocked back to life again, then an even younger take on himself must be skulking about. Junior stands up, stretching his legs. He takes a big circle around the Pantheon, noticing a slightly older fashion sensibility in these younger people. Some stores rock their older branding. Hot Topic still had its dull, lacerated typography out front. Before they moved from a crypt to a bank vault.

Down below he hears some commotion. Six boys wrapped in those OF donut clothes cooler boys used to wear until they suddenly didn't. Standing in a circle, glancing around in a short radius like something's missing. One at a time they look up, a good time to look at their faces. It's hard to tell from up here, but one of them looks familiar. A bus stop buddy. Buddy as in person Junior knew and who knew him. They were not friends. Really it seemed like he couldn't get on the bus and to the back quick enough. Rinse all the neighbor off in a wash of iPod on the school bus *no earbuds*.

Junior's trying to get a better look at his face. While adjusting his vest a Planet 16 token falls loose, spinning to a sphere before it clacks on the floor just behind their table.

So that's what they had been reacting to. He thought they'd dropped into their chairs with an undue amount of spark. Now they sit still.

Returning to his spot, he falls back into his trance with a practiced easiness. How those monks can meditate for hours, or years if that one article is to be believed, makes sense now. In a way he'd been practicing for years.

Alright, what's something he just loves to ponder. Something he can get lost in. Is it okay that the US, and most of the developed world in aggregate, have roads everywhere? Does the asphalt poison the ground below? If every road were ripped up all at once like pulling out an old moldy carpet, would there still be an impression left? The public library had bare concrete

for years, meaning to replace the carpeting but running out of money to do so between removing the old floor and applying the new one. Very Punk Rock of them. They left the floors naked long enough for Junior to prefer that look over the office park brown that used to—

Already?

He jumps at the first sensation. That same itch on the back of his neck that had been snapping him to reality the past two times. A memory requires his urgent attention; he needs to show him himself.

“... ɹɹɹɹ ɹɹ ɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹɹ ɹɹɹɹ ɹɹɹ ɹɹɹɹ ɹɹɹ \ ɹɹɹɹɹ ɹɹɹ  
ɹɹɹɹɹ ɹɹ ɹɹɹɹ ɹɹɹɹ ɹɹɹ.”

How long had it been since he saw Wishkah at Christmastime? Well, that'd be right now but obviously he's talking about the other last time. As he grew up he also grew to hate the holiday crush, no matter how pretty and impressively all-out Wishkah went with its Christmas decorations. Ribbons hung from the ceiling in weighed parabolas, close enough he could swat at the bottoms with his hand (two or three before his mom told him to cut it out). Overnight the pedestrian, totally unfestive planters were artificial pine trees, save for the giant Christmas dick-swinger in the Pantheon. Apparently real, sourced from a farm in British Columbia. As impressive as that tree was (looking down at it right now Junior thinks he could jump and glint the star with his fingertips) it was only ever the silver medal of Christmas at Wishkah photo opps.

This has to be a Santa visit. What else would urge him to wake up? Other than a kid getting in his Christmas wish there's little here that's pleasant in practice. Every store is extra crowded, every bench and table is occupied. Nowhere to linger. It really sucks when the magic of the holiday season, exclusive to the teeniest of boppers, is gone.

An inordinate amount of floor space was taken up by complimentary gift wrapping. Free for anyone who purchased a gift

at a Wishkah store (and had the receipt as proof). Probably expensive as all hell for MDCo to operate but that's gotta be how thousands of proximate Washingtonians got their presents wrapped, as well as how many more thousands of approximate Washingtonian children found out Santa doesn't exist. Junior learned to recognize the Wishkah complimentary gift wrapping, which they really should've changed more often.

Near the balcony of the west wing is where Santa set up workshop the most. Sometimes the location changed but it was always where the biggest queue could be pitched without inhibiting store entry and foot traffic. Or that's what's gotta be the motivation. Santa does arrive with a pretty big shack for temporary fixture standards.

He remembers those shoes from the 4<sup>th</sup> grade. Too old to still be getting Santa photos if you asked him. So don't ask him because that's an absurd thing to think when you're still a decade and change removed from drinking.

Mom and dad liked the Santa photos, same as the rest of the family. For a while Junior was the only kid. He'd be on that guy's lap into his teens if the cousins never arrived. And he'd been visiting Wishkah Santa long enough to notice when the actor had changed. Performer? What would they like to be called so as not to break the holiday kayfabe? In his nosy kid era he'd asked a Santa outright if he was a real one, to which the answer one should give to a kindergartner is obviously yes. Yet this Santa weaved a yarn. Apparently the real Santa recruits a small company of Santalikes to work the front lines, reporting Christmas wishes back to home base up north. What a way to leave that kid with more questions than the service rate can accommodate.

So he ran with this story and now at ten years old, apparently long in the tooth for Santa pictures but still forty percent confident he's real, sat down on an adult man's lap for what he needed to be one of the last times, heard a crack in the ceiling that sounded like the snap of a camera, thought he was wasting

people's time which he hated doing and hates doing and he wussed out on his actual Christmas wish at the last second. A bike he already wasn't allowed to have because their neighborhood had too many hills. He can't remember what he got instead.

Looking uncomfortable in that sweater and those white chinos, the warm and festive outfit his parents had him wear 24/7 throughout the holiday season. Good grief, is that really what his hair looked like, at the time? What is it with mom-orchestrated haircuts and asymmetrical bangs? Hideous.

Following in a parallel line, Junior watches him and his parents do some reverse relative shopping. The shopping bags disappear as they place dinnerware sets and scarves back on the shelves of Pottery Barn and... wow, Burberry. Feeling generous, were we? A laugh sneaks up on Junior as he sees his parents had bought him something in secret. Evidently, as they passed through the GameStop and little Junior identified a new, cool game (Batman: Arkham Asylum), his mom pulled him away and distracted him with hollow questions about Wii peripherals while his dad rang up the game and tucked it away in the HomeGoods bag. How cool of them, to buy a T-rated game for a ten year old without checking the content. A ten year who cannot be trusted with so much as hills.

. . .

Every time he wakes up it's because of himself. He looks up at the floor and sees an eight year old Junior with his dad, refueling on some Auntie Anne's. He's clutching a half empty popcorn bucket and Junior scours his memory of the year for what movie it could've been. Something he should've asked Otto (apparently he never has or will) is the ramifications of making eye contact with himself. Little Junior is looking up at the ceiling in bewilderment, mouth hung open, still taking fistfuls of popcorn. Sure, he remembers always looking at Wishkah's ceiling, but he doesn't remember ever seeing anyone literally *up* there. Looking up, all you would see is someone looking down.

Next time he wakes up Little Junior is nowhere to be seen. After a half lap wandering the even younger Wishkah, he finds commotion at Planet 16 and remembers a birthday party. One of his neighbors, one that moved away in the third grade. He should've been checking in on the arcade already; the old cabinets eventually replaced by newer, more exciting games takes him back. House of the Dead, Hydro Thunder, et cetera. The birthday party is more concerned with ticket acquisition. Little Junior is attempting the basketball and failing too hard for words. No swish, no style. Little Junior shot puts the balls directly below the net with machine precision. If that was how points were scored he'd be forward center for the Bulls.

Much of what he sees for the next few jolts is progressively littler Juniors and the sad reality of his parents looking younger. The trio goes from not holding hands to holding hands to riding on his dad's shoulders, all the way back to the stroller.

No good reason to remember that lime green stroller until now. Mom wanted something visible, clearly. The thing she never lets go of anyway. But it is successfully visible. All the way from up here. Some of these stores Junior doesn't recognize. Limited Too, Oshkosh, the Disney Store—that's where they must be headed. Disney Store was his first favorite. Credit to the designers, it did feel like visiting the parks. Just without riding anything and all you can do is buy Disney merchandise. So exactly like visiting the parks.

No way there was a Warner Bros. store at the *same time*. Junior doesn't remember a Warner Bros. store whatsoever, much less this beautiful, dignified half-museum half rack of *Marvin the Martian* coin banks. Why did mom never steer the stroller in here? Even the littlest Junior would... oh. They're exiting. So they're gonna enter in a few minutes. Funny. Literally cannot recall that store ever being a Wishkah destination, let alone visiting. But he has gone pretty far back. He can't recall owning Crocs, either. Someone call the fashion police.

End of the line. Barring any earlier point his parents thought

to take him to a shopping mall, this is it. Where Junior's about to venture encroaches on paradoxical. Now would be a good time to seek help.

It's tough to proceed in a straight line without stopping to gawk at retail space of old. Is the Gadzooks supposed to go unremarked? The Babbage's? The slightly less horny Spencer's? Odd he'd be so nostalgic over things he couldn't remember. Little Junior can't get much littler than now. Figures his heart chases a dream he'd seen somewhere else.

He's arrived at the MDCo meeting room, just in time to fuss over someone other than Roger taking up ceiling or floor. He'd be happy, he thinks. The more people to help him with these next crucial steps, the better. And if Otto's there, the more people to beat him up the better.

Junior squeaks the door open so slowly he convinces himself of sounds and bodies that aren't there. Save a different table and different chairs the meeting room is empty.

"Roger?"

"... regoR?"

Really? Neither?

Junior heads for his next best play. If not Roger, maybe Ethan.

. . .

Wishkah's antfarm architecture makes an eerie amount of sense. While it's a large mall it's not one with a lot of empty space. The cathedrallike vaulted ceiling of the Pantheon is an outlier. Meanwhile Junior can walk through the north wing, up through the food court, down the incline running above the escalators, and right into Wishkah cinemas as easy as taking the floor. Someone knew ceiling folk would need to get around easy.

The point in time Junior's arrived at predates the nineties



and aughts additions to the movie mural, ending at *Pretty in Pink* (still doesn't check out). The kiosks are missing, with only personal interaction at the box office standing between moviegoers and... *Gladiator*? Wow. Ridley Scott's *Gladiator*, fresh in theaters. Crazy to think some really old movies were movies people actually saw in theaters, let alone theaters Junior has been to.

On today's Wishkah Cinemas programming: *Gladiator*, *Shanghai Noon*, *Erin Brockovich*, *Mission: Impossible II*, *Dinosaur*, *U-571*, and—holy shit—*Battlefield Earth*. What a lineup. Strange to see the posters so crisp. Inside the theater proper, strange to see physical marquees instead of the digital rollers. Strange to see the old Icee branding. Somehow the popcorn looks older. Yellower. Still, much of the lobby will stay the same to the cinema's dying day. Colorwise. All that brown and gold. Movie magic.

Earlier the lobby looked so huge. Barren, for lack of velvet ropes and movie advertisements. *Dinosaur* has a large cardboard cutout positioned where Ethan had been just a few decades from now. The lobby shrinks further when an audience leaving a *Gladiator* showing filters backwards into the auditorium doors. Junior crouches and sneaks through as people spill through just above his head, all the way to the theater where end credits scroll downwards on one of Wishkah Cinemas two extra big screens. Theatergoers walk up the steps, through the aisles, meticulously set down their snacks, and sit. Up in the front row, a teenager who had punted his popcorn tin across the flat space in front of the screen performs magic. All the popcorn scattered across the floor vacuums back into the popcorn bucket that stops at his outstretched foot before snapping back to his hands. That teenager sits back down.

Junior's not here to watch Emperor Commodus' magic sword bring Maximus back to life before kicking him down the social ladder, all the way to low level gladiator before miraculously promoting him back to general status. All he wants is to

see an analog movie projector. He can hardly remember the old ways, before the pivot to digital. He clears the auditorium ceiling and looks into the little projector window, snickering at what looks so, so old to him. Film reel. The little black dot in the corner denoting the switch in reels. The puzzled murmurings of an audience who has their view of the movie's end interrupted by some giant circle in front of the projector. *Is someone putting the lens cap on?* Junior realizes what a rude moviegoer he's being and ducks out of the way.

He waits by the auditorium doors for someone to leave for the bathroom, a current he rides so no one sees a door open on its own and, correctly, surmise Wishkah is haunted. He drops back down to the ceiling, stopping in the center so he can remember why he abandoned his post at the Pantheon and

"Looking for your spot?"

Oh thank god.

"You're six feet off," he says, throwing his arms over his head and stretching hard, flannel shirt ballooning his frame to scarecrow proportions. "You left yours in the same spot I put my first car accident."

"What did I put there?" Junior wonders.

"You'll know when you look at it," Ethan says so matter of factly. "The burden of memory is on you."

"Do you know a guy named Otto?" Junior asks. "He's also a basement dweller. Been through, just like us."

"Hm..." Ethan scans the topographical spackle below their feet, waving for Junior to step off a piece he might need. "Nnnnnnot seeing an Otto here," he says. "Sorry. Maybe he's new? Congratulations on making it through, by the way."

"No, he's not new. Just tried to have me killed, actually."

"No shit? When?"

"Couple decades from now, give or take. Anyway, it didn't

work.”

“Clear to me, dude. You’d be more of a ghost than most of us. More than me? I dunno about that. I do stick around one spot more than you.”

“You’re also moving in rewind,” Junior says. “Are you going back to try the contest again? Do you know how to rewind past your earliest memory? Can you tell me how?”

“Easy, dude. Too early in the day to be asking me so much. Let’s break this problem into chunks, mm? Math class. What was the first question?”

“Can you tell me how to rewind past—”

“Stop. That was your third.”

“... Are you gonna try the contest again?”

“Yup! Thanks for asking. See, I’ve never tried the bumper strat. Your science teacher, yea? He had two hands on the back. I’m thinking I’d be more comfortable with my palms to the Earth.”

“Good luck, I guess,” Junior finds himself laughing. “Hey.”

“Shoot.”

“If you won the van, do you think you’d leave this place?”

“That there wasn’t any of your questions.”

“You sure?”

Ethan’s train of thought seems to stop and throw it in reverse. “Would I leave? Absolutely! Hundred percent. As far as possible, you people would never hear about me again. Why do you ask?”

“It’s just... I’ve met a lot of Wishkah holdouts today—well, I guess not today—”

“I know what you mean.”

“Right. Everyone’s here because they wanna fix something,

but I'm not convinced anyone does. They... they're *trying* not to. It's not the chance to re-do something that pulls people here. It's something else."

"Scary," Ethan jokes, inviting Junior to pace the lobby with him. "What do you think, huh? Is it *evil*?"

"No, I... I don't know what I came here for, honestly. Now that I've seen everything."

"You're nostalgic," Ethan diagnoses just like that. "Everyone gets that way. Few people can gorge themselves like you and I are now. Let me juke it on you: if you found what you were looking for, do you think you would leave?"

"What was I looking for?"

"Jesus, do I have to do all the thinking around here? You're the one who wants to *stay* here, my man. This is your happy place. Did you feel that Cheshire cat grin on your face when you crawled out of that theater just now? Your heart is full."

Junior supposes it is. "?"

"At least us delusionals can pretend we're chasing something."

"I didn't mean it like that, I just meant—"

"Save it," Ethan says. "We've got nothing but time. How's about when you get what you want, and I get my Largo, we load up and go find that next thing we want. Hm?"

Mom said don't get in cars with strangers. Good thing Ethan isn't one. "Sure," Junior says, making note of what his grin feels like so he can notice without help.

"And hey, you wanted to know how to keep going?"

"My third question, yes."

"Your fourth."

"How do I keep going?"

“Just happens. Kettle theory: it’s not something you’ll ever do thinking about it. But sometimes you’ll look back and realize how far you’ve gone.”

. . .

Okay. Look down. Focus. No, bump that, don’t focus. Think about nothing. Y’know, the way you do when you think about something useless. Foam footballs from the playground. Why did they have bite marks? What freak weirdo kid was biting the footballs? Hard enough for marks? Hard enough to rip *chunks* out? Incidentally those early foam footballs were manufactured by Nerf, of course better known to Junior’sdhuaid generation as plastic arms dealers, with the pump actionsdfnklvac-tion pistols and on one occasion a mountwquigjdab-kfoihnklgbvjsnklvbadswg one occasion a mounted machinegun. A funny jump in product, Junior would say. Going from sports toweksfuiewbejklgreiofvdhbejkwa.rgdzfuistrdc-gvjlyobewrgnoleioagrhubifkjewlnragioefbdhvbunjwen’progvi-hubjnroe’phgojbfdohubejwnrkltg.....  
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What was he just doing?

*Is this a bad time to open the closet door*, he wonders, hand on the push bar and already pushing. He'd gone to bed smelling popcorn and he wakes up smelling popcorn. Oil would be a better summation of things. Corn isn't a smell and has not become one in the five-ish years he's been asleep.

A man enters the restroom at the precise time Junior makes it to the hall and doesn't seem to realize it's the women's restroom he's... wait, no he's not. He's going in the men's restroom which, if Junior did this right and he's made it to the year nineteen hundred and ninety five, used to be where the women's restroom is now. So somewhere in the next five years cinema management will switch which bathroom was which.

Just forget it, Junior, you have a game to rig.

It's not like he was alive now but sneaking around a 1995 cinema paints in neons how every little thing changes. Cash looks different—people *use cash*, moreover. The clothes are so ill-fitting and, forgive the guy in the bike helmet, ugly. But this younger Wishkah Cinemas, apart from switching the bathrooms around which will never not be weird, bring the glitz of show business with puffy red carpets. Cleaning soda spills out of that dense thing must be the funnest fun.

Focus, idiot. Get to the lobby. Ethan is about to lose. Or he just lost and Junior's gonna miss how it happened while he's busy ogling slightly older movie posters—oh, shit, look at that. *A Goofy Movie*.

The lobby of 1995 is densely populated and concentrates at a ring of velvet rope. Within that, a black minivan accented in gold. A woman, both older and less male than Ethan, is the only

civilian between the rope and the car, losing her shit while two annoyed looking men in button up shirts and lanyards agree she's very lucky. Oh. So Junior just missed how this lady won. Good thing he can make her lose a few minutes ago.

He thought he'd be waiting here a while. Until right before Ethan loses. Logic concludes contestants of this—in practice very stupid looking—car touch contest would be disqualified one by one, with most eliminations happening in the first few hours and the last few fighting it out in a long stretch of attrition. (No wonder Ethan's needed so many tries. Hardly the thing one can practice, or approach with some killer strategy the other contestant haven't played enough car touching games to work out).

But that's not what happens. Junior does not have to wait long because all twenty-four contestants, save for that lucky woman, seem to have thrown their hands off the van simultaneously. That means the contest was playing out as normal until one critical moment, when all but one person was charged to stop. Explains the fizzling rise of commotion he'd walked in on. This looks like an outrageous end. No endurance tested, no mental rigidity pushed to the limit. What the hell is about to go on here?

Junior would kill to fastforward and rewind at his discretion. Run this tape frame by frame because it really seems like everyone took their hands off at once. Including Ethan and including Mr. Glasgow in the back. Like the contestants were responding to some instant discomfort or pain. A kind the eventual winner (her strategy was to bend down and lazily rest her open hand on an oblong headlight) avoided by coincidence.

Braids of red and black cables spill out from under the island of carpet that van calls home. Powering the flood lights, no doubt, with the exception of the northwest corner. One would imagine that light just gave out. In an endurance contest, most things will. What Junior can see, what no one seems to ever see, is the light never "went out" and was never plugged in to

start. The lone black cable snaking amongst the reds is a jumper, latched to the tailpipe.

The closet. There's the origin point. Junior sneaks from the lobby to the auditorium hall, finding the utility closet where all the cables begin, snaps the door handle quick as he can, and slides inside, where he finds Otto squeezing open the jaws of the cable's metal clips, prying it from a car battery stripped of its labels.

He says, eyes on the battery, "You made it."

Adrenaline. Juniors never talked to someone who's made an attempt on his life. Or he has and doesn't remember, which he's starting to think is just as good. "Are you surprised?" he spits back. "Oh, wait, I guess you wouldn't be. Nothing surprises you." This sounds cooler in his head.

"Right you are. A couple of cycles ago meeting you here was a surprise. I'd have to leap forward and fry you with this." Otto snaps the brass alligator jaws. "It's never not worked but I like to avoid directly killing you if I can. Few things bother me as much as room for error. But Otto, if that's the case, why aren't you killing me? Because I've been here before and I've got contingencies. Know what does bother me more? Stupid questions."

"I didn't ask that one."

"But you have. And there's no guarantee you won't the next time we do this. Mind telling me what made you stop?"

"None of your business."

"Last time you said *beeswax*. By then my contingency was already working like a charm but just because you said *beeswax*, I fried you anyway."

"You're gonna sabotage the contest."

"Correction: I just did." Otto slides a hand in his kangaroo pocket and seizes a blaring stopwatch he snuffs in the balling of



his hand. “Lucky for me, whatever else you’ve been fucking with doesn’t change the electroshock plan, which going forward I will do at 4:28pm on the dot. In here, and I know this goes without saying, I can’t *see* when everyone is supposed to get shocked. All I have is the time.”

“I didn’t ask,” Junior says.

“Should’ve cut me off sooner, then. I could tell you all about my stopwatches. Got a bunch of ‘em. This one here, see it’s white like your helmet, this one tells me when you’re about to open that door. Some watches just remind me to set *other* watches—”

“You prevent Ethan from winning the van. You keep him trying, you lead him on. Why.”

Otto is already annoyed. As if this is his business and Junior’s being the rude one. “Semantics,” he drops the cable which falls up to the floor with a smack. “I’ve never *made* Ethan lose. Ethan never wins that stupid minivan. It’s not what will happen, it’s what needs to happen. The fates don’t care how, only that he does. Whether he loses by his own lack of conviction, or by my electrocuting his hands.”

“So you have met him.”

“Hard to spend this much time here and never get to know the locals.”

“Then why doesn’t he know you?”

“You’ve met him. Can’t you guess why? He doesn’t care to remember. Same goes for Tiff. People arrive at this mall and trap themselves in vicious cycles of their own choosing. Going back and seeing the past, re-doing the regrets, it’s too intoxic—”

“Tiff?”

“Oh, you inconsiderate fuck. Yes, Tiff. Works the counter at the tiki bar from here to eternity. Y’know, every time we do

this I kinda hope you'll learn her name on you own but you never do."

"The girl you took through the basement. The girl whose brain you rotted."

"Tiff couldn't tell you when it's been a full minute. Okay? She's gone fishing. You trust her to remember her traitors? In however many times I've gone back and forth I *might* have spiced things up and managed the bar. That's me being facetious; yes, I remember every day of working above Tiff and know her better than you care to. Clearly."

"What's the matter with her, then."

"I thought you wanted to know about Ethan."

"I wanna know about everyone!" Junior snaps. "I wanna know why I don't remember what a dickhead you are, why everyone's trapped, I wanna know why I can't remember being here and why you won't let me remember—"

"Why won't I let you? Buddy, you hardly exist as it is. *Ugh, wah, why can't I remember anything? Why can't I remember—* what the *fuck* is there to remember, exactly? You and your pathetic, noncontributing life. Remember what, exactly? All those times you woke up, ate, drank, napped, jerked off, went to school, went to work, slept, repeat, repeat, repeat. But you wanna *remember* doing something. Remember doing what, moron? *You-don't-do-anything!* So you lie, you pretend you're someone who does. Lie about bands you've never seen and corners of the world you've never visited, you lie about people you know and adventures you've never had. I know your type, and I *hate* that fucker."

"I know that" Junior says. "I know all of that. And I'm not asking about me."

"Yes you are."

"Oh *fuck* you, dude, if I'm right and you're wiping their brains—Ethan, Tiff, Ritchie—just tell me now so I feel better."

Sucking his teeth, Otto returns a seething “whatever you say, boss.”

Junior takes an elbow in the sternum before he’s ready, if this is a feeling anyone can be ready for. The “evacuate all air from lungs” button has been pressed. He falls back and Otto rallies, blasting him a second time, a third, a fourth. When Junior doubles over Otto kicks him in the stomach steel-toe first. So this is what getting beat up is like. An odd item for the list of formative experiences (doesn’t mean it’s not one). And a tough one to mark off now that it’s happening. In his imagination he did a little better than this but the struggle is compounded by a lack of air to the brain and an elbow to the spine that just makes everything hurt at once. Pardon the lack of poetry. Junior’s got a lot on his mind right now. A fist, mainly.

When he hits the floor outside the Wishkah cinemas lobby it occurs to him how unfair this matchup is. Like, how many times has Otto got to practice this? Good lord. Junior feels like he *walks* into open fire. Getting his ass beat is a two-man job. What he’d give to be that bright, talented kid right now, along with that X factor that guarantees bright talentedness materializes in fights won.

His beating comes to a merciful end. Otto has so utterly cut off Junior’s breath to the point that he can’t get the air out to groan in pain. Still, he kicks Junior’s helplessness closer to the skylight, knocking him into the shallow decline he nonetheless tumbles down, landing on cold glass.

“Bet you felt smart, huh? Rewinding on your own? Don’t forget you’re using a word that *I* made up.”

“*Rewinding was already a thing,*” Junior whimpers. “*From VCRs and stuff...*”

“My fucking neologism, then! I swear, this is the part of you I love killing the most. This pedantic little shit side. Manual transmission thinks, he can drift hotshot. Once you get comfortable with someone you have one fuck of a time turning it off.”

“So you—”

“Zip! I promise you never say anything I’m not sick to death answering. What, you think is the first time you and I have met in this spot, dancing this dance? Round seven, motherfucker. Yes, this ends with me killing. And the only shocking part is how easy it is. Someone thinks something, I go back to the point they first started thinking that, destroy it, and boom. Paradox, their brain doesn’t know what to do, and slowly every memory in the Kuiper belt of their subconscious just... just rots. If that sounds harsh, trust me, they’re way easier to deal with in this state. Less rebellious, like you.”

“But why? Do you just hate them?”

“In my position you’d learn to hate anyone. Roommates can hardly stand a year with each other, imagine *decades—centuries*, at my pace. But it’s not their fault, not entirely. Wrong place wrong time situation. They have the privilege of forgetting; me... I have had nothing better to do with my life than memorize every minute detail of it. Mhmm. The lighthouse keeper.”

“Tiff needs to go home.”

“What Tiff wants is more convenient than what she needs. She wants that bar, dude. Consequently, she altered history to stay there forever. What is it she wanted to hold on to? Who’s to say. It was so many cycles ago it basically never existed.”

“You took her down there.”

“In the most common version of events, sure. The most stable where it concerns the infinity beyond these walls, for sure. What an asshole. And I did not speak out, because I was not a tacky bartender—shut the fuck up. Seriously. Every time with this weepy deflecting horseshit. You’ve learned this, hmm, nineteen times? Not once have you ever attempted to free poor Tiff yourself, not once have you *ever* considered this important enough to remember on your own. That’s why I can never accept this hollow whiteknighting of yours. *Oh, wah, but why do*

*you do this?* —that’s what you say next, and my answer hasn’t changed: the needs of two or three otherwise complete losers is microscopic to the delicate fucking balance of spacetime, dude. Goes without saying.”

“Except for you?”

“What?”

“Delicate balance of spacetime. Doesn’t apply to you. Is that right?”

“For every person who finds that basement, the chances of space and time going calzone on each other increases by a factor of Number We Haven’t Invented. The only things that survive are the things I know are paramount. Call me conceited but, yes, this doesn’t apply to me. I’m the only one who gives a shit about how things *should* be. I came here to see the mall again; look, don’t touch. And that’d be fine if the rest of these people could do the same. But no. All of you have to come in and change shit. I’ve seen timelines where Rainier blew up. I’ve seen iterations with dead musicians alive and alive musicians dead—don’t ask, it’s never the ones you want. Nothing outside this mall has made sense to me in a long time but since natural order matters to me and no one else fate ordained *me* the lighthouse keeper of all that makes sense. Just because I was the first person curious enough. Is that fair?”

“So you—”

“Keep these fuckers placated. Yes. Tiff gets to keep her shit-job; Ethan forever chases that minivan—”

“And you make sure Ritchie never saves Sears.”

Silence. “... No? That’s got nothing to do with me, Ritchie’s just stupid. I’ve never bothered with Ritchie because he’s trying to do something that obviously can’t happen. He can’t save Sears and he never will but he’s not bothering anyone by trying. Why am I doing this with you? This is atypical. Just—”

Throwing his hard hat just past Junior’s feet, Otto makes a

crack in the glass. Cold itchy sweat scampers up Junior's back.

"Just do what you're supposed to."

"Die?!"

"Well you've never complained before, I don't see what the big deal is now. I thought you knew how disposable you are.

"How's about a refresher, we're—" Otto checks a watch from his pocket "—forty-six seconds ahead of last time. I've been doing this longer than anybody. Longer than anybody's lived without this kind of help. Our motivations aren't so different: you wanted to see the old mall, *one more time*. Same goes for me, dude. This is where I was happy. This is where things make sense. I wasn't so occupied with working and making money. For some people, that happy place is the house they grew up in, or their school, or a park, but for people like you and me it was the Wishkah shopping center. Consumerist as fuck, but the lord does work through a sinner. Anyway, like you, I found the basement. *Precisely* like you I convinced myself it was the point of my trip. Unlike you, the land did not cease to be precious. Memory is held up by toothpicks; a *whistle* brings it all down. Idiots like Tiff or Ritchie come here thinking they can change the past, and once they realize they can they start thinking they should. Tempting, but it's wrong. Somehow no matter how many times I do this I'm the only one who can see it's wrong.

"First it was Tiff. Worked at a bar. *Finally*. She always wanted to be a bartender. For a few cycles it was great. But eventually she got it in her head she should quit. Why? She had a great thing going. As iconic as anything in Wishkah was her presence behind that counter. So rather than allow her to do this, I cut the root. The idea of quitting thus never occurred to her. Then a whole lot of other things stopped occurring to her. Could be worse. She's happy and doing what she's supposed to.

"Who's next... Ethan? No! Ritchie. Pardon me. On one of

his regular shame benders, he found his way back to the empty department store, the... 'heart of a community,' as he put it, the one he tried to save but couldn't. Now he thinks he can eventually save the place and once upon a time I thought he could and had to sabotage some of his data. Turns out, nah, he can't. So I leave him be. But you already know that. Unless you already forgot.

"Ethan isn't supposed to win that car. If he does, he leaves, and he doesn't keep those records I need him to keep. A vital domino, Ethan. A corner piece.

"With those exceptions, I'd done pretty well keeping things in natural order. Time proceeds the way it's supposed to, and if not, I can go back, and course correct. But then, a few cycles ago, you showed up. Looking a lot like me, talking like me, thinking like me. If that wasn't creepy enough it seemed like the only thing we didn't have in common was what to do with a place like this. I mean, I mean... you wanted to leave! Tear right through all our memories, change little things here and there, and with no critical thinking destroy the people and I am *supposed* to be. You would change Wishkah completely, and all the while have no idea what you're doing. No matter how hard I would plead, you'd change shit. You change shit without knowing, without caring... of all the people who come back to Wishkah, you are the worst to deal with. So I kill you. Or to be more precise you kill yourself. For example, I crack the window you happen to be standing on but it'd be your rash thinking that makes you break the whole pane. Sounds unfair, but that's life. I would know.

"But this should be the last time you tumble down into LEO, if that makes you feel better. Discovered a more permanent way to ensure you don't fuck with my mall anymore. When I'm done, which shouldn't take long, this version of you right here and right now will never have been. All that'll be left—all that ever will have been as far as the universe is concerned—will be me, Otto, the guy who loves this mall in an

infinitely stronger way.”

The cracks underneath Junior stretch out to the corners. Otto turns and starts walking, too casually, back to the underside escalators.

“I’d say goodbye, but to who? I’m basically alone.”

In a blink, Otto vanishes.

. . .

This is bad, Junior thinks, walking a big wide lap in Wishkah’s south wing, before forgetting what was supposed to be bad.

It’s the painful nagging like when he can’t place the seven-ish lyrics repeating on loop to a song. Eventually the motif is so molten and malleable the words cease to be words. At that point the likelihood of ever joining words and song reduce to zero and all he can hope to do is forget the dilemma entirely. What a thing it is to want to forget something so normal.

He’d come here for something. In his pocket he feels the crush of unlanyarded keys, briefly remembers his fear of butt-dialing the panic button. Then it’s gone. Whatever it was. Has the south wing fountain always taken up this much space? A boulder parts the river. Eventually the river will fix itself. Someone had used this as a metaphor, once. Otto. Coins shimmer at the bottom. One bounces to the hand of a child who shoveled it in both hands cupped instead of the cool guy flick of the thumb. Pathetic. A penny, too. Didn’t her parents tell her quarters pack the real wish-granting punch? Or, ooh, a dollar coin. Shimmering statue of liberty Sacagawea buffalo gold—nevermind, he remembers fat fifty-center JFK coins. Toss in one of those and it’d be rude not to give you your wish. Shouldn’t the yoo-nited states be printing the current president on all the newly minted coins? Do as the Romans, you greatest empire on Earth. Ironical notes tornado in his throat, saying this inside Wishkah. Then it’s gone.



Why had he been thinking about coins? Probably doesn't matter. TVs in the food court draw attention away from the Orange Julius and whatever a Mrs. Fields is. Adulation dissolves to anticipation as the innocent man on screen is declared undeclared. Cookies are returned to ovens and smoothies are returned to corporeal fruit and ice. Someone looks up at the ceiling, but Junior forgets to care. Something falls from his pockets to a planter.

A magic doctor gun has brought Brandon Lee back to life. Who is that? Don't ask Junior, he doesn't know who people are. The strangest thing is all those floor people are really invested while Brandon is dead and the moment he's brought back to life by aforementioned doctor gun they, at best, carry a passive interest in his *The Crow* movie. Soon that movie is cancelled so hard they stop starting to make it.

Bad times at Planet 16. Much rabble being roused over the violent content of the hit new arcade machine *Mortal Kombat*. In fairness the violence for this time is very real. Blood shoots out of the middle of that guy's body like a garden sprinkler just like in real life and violence solves problems just like in real life. What about this do we not want kids to see, Junior has to wonder until he stops wondering very abruptly.

Mikhail Gorbachev is president of Russia. His first order of business is changing his country's name to the USSR. Fascinating creative choice. After the Beatles song, one must assume. Junior never thought the song was that good, but that's all he can think because at this moment he forgets how the song goes entirely. Also, who are the Beetles.

The aggressively suggestive Desert Storm has transitioned to the comparatively docile Desert Shield. Sure, why not. The names match and go some way towards explaining that bottle of Jolt Cola Junior had seen a guy drinking a few months from now. Going backwards, it looks like armed conflict really does solve issues and save lives. Looking backwards might be the only way this makes sense. A sword has become a shield.

The number another summer sound of the funky drummer. Hm? Forget it. Gorbachev has ordered his people to erect a wide concrete wall in the middle of Berlin, which becomes quite awkward when president Reagan tells him to tear it down a couple days later. Yeesh. Since Junior last checked, the Circuit City is now a very big Haggen. He never knew Wishkah had a Haggen, nor has he ever known fully what a Haggen is. See, he comes from a QFC family, a store different from Haggen in some incorporeal

Toni Morrison has written a novel apparently so bad the Pulitzer commission has elected to take her award away. On stage, no less. Seems kinda harsh. Junior remembers English teachers speaking quite highly of that one. But what does he know about books? All the books he's read don't exist and will not for several years, if ever. He's sure somewhere along the way he's knocked a sign over and now the next person to win a Pulitzer and keep it is doomed to pull shifts at a warehouse. Excuse him: fulfillment center. Do they say that these days? Junior thinks, briefly, he should find the person who will coin the term and kill them. The Otto Special.

Ladies and gentlemen, Hulk Hogan has peeled the very big Andre the Giant off the mat, over his shoulder, and onto his big feet. Round of applause. And it looks like—yes—it looks like soon after doing this the two oily men have agreed to call it good and part ways. In other news, *The Simpsons* has taken such a drastic fall in quality it's been relegated to shorts on the *w0d2 nsm11U ʎəɔɔɛɹT ədT* in picture quality so garish it should be illegal.

Halley's Comet has given the Earth a quick smooch. One of very few events to occur semi-normally from Junior's point of view, though he's having some trouble remembering what's so remarkable about it. Get Halley off that thing, dagnabbit. Watching it from the skylight, positioning his feet such that the comet passed from one Timberland to the other, Junior imagined himself falling down into space like that one guy wanted

him to. And he times his fall so perfectly he lands on the comet, hurling through the stars or wherever it plans on taking him. Maybe this is what everyone got on when it came time to grow up. The bus he'd missed.

New Coke is Old Coke. Cease To Exist Coke. Long live Coca-Cola. An idea so bad it has been struck from time itself, just like the name of this guy thinking about New Coke. Marty McFly is poised to rewind in a more convenient and marketable way. Something important is happening but he can't say he cares or knows what it is or cares to know. On the TVs by the food court or on display at the Super Sears something is happening but he thinks about the stores themselves and on brief occasions New Coke. He feels warm. His gut is a coal engine burning fumes. He can't remember the last time he ate or tied his shoes. Or the exit to this mall for that matter. Where had he parked? Did he park and, also, how does he get where all those people are, down there. He wonders if one of them knows his name, then he imagines one of them being nice enough to give him a name. He'd never name himself. Too much pressure.

Some things have happened that would be notable to someone else. If you're nice enough to ask him, he'd like to see something new. Nowadays his attention falls and rises at the rate of mountain ranges, and when he comes to, months have passed. These days he spends most of his time on the skylight. Doing nothing specific. Just watching the clouds float on the brilliant blue and the stars twinkle in the bedsheet. This place he's in chill him to the hard things under his skin. Skin? Skin. He catches himself stomping on the glass a little harder than usual, then he forgets if he's ever stomped on the glass period. Too aggressive. Gives him too much control. He's never liked having that stuff. He watched someone walk into a wall that seemed to open up on command. A thought burns in his throat as he retraces that person's steps and tries to remember, simultaneously, if that person had waved him over. Starts with a J. Somebody's name. Forget it.

Ouch. Rippling waves of hot pain ran through his hip. Ice water soaked his boxers and flashfroze his cheap jeans to PVC pipe. Nearly as soon as he embarked

he slipped.

begin-  
Did anyone see?  
nings  
See him

like a toddler learning to walk? He knows  
someone did.

He was waiting

another few  
years.

pants-wetting ice.  
he paced the east entrance in long, gentle  
Even though walking  
was all he had done                      Like a zoo animal.

If he knew this impromptu visit would become  
a hypothetical ig-  
noring the type of person he knows he is. He was made unrea-  
sonably uncomfortable by the idea of sitting in there alone.

today he saw nothing new. He was made un-  
reasonably uncomfortable by the idea of sitting in there alone.

He remembers

he was partial  
picked better  
name was  
c h i  
p  
he still wishes he  
His

On the way out he'd seen an arcade token jammed in the sliding door's rubber weatherstrip

twentv-four, wovt-vtnwv

He squeezes the token so tight in his fist he feels skin burst under the pressure. The film reel. Lost-and-found. Concierge desk.

. . .

A coin in a planter, one Junior (that's it) has to recover with feats of tape-on-a-broom-handle heretofore unseen on Wishkah (there's the name) grounds. Pulling back the token and dirt combo reminds Junior (so nice you say it twice) of many a ruined sticky hand toy. Irreparably fucked the moment it hits a dust bunny or sand or potted plant and just eughh. Forgetting some things is permissible, surely.

This token tells him how to operate a film camera, which in 1983 (thanks Sports Illustrated swimsuit calendar and also the guy at JCPenney who thought the backroom of the shoe department could use the cheesecake) the cinema would be equipped with exclusively. To play it, Junior will have to undo the film setup for an upcoming screening of *Revenge of the Ninja*. Sorry, *Revenge of the Ninja* fans.

Only it doesn't play when he gets everything set up just as the coin ordered. A jam reveals itself when he attempts to run the reel and leaves a lazy hand on the top to sense pressure. Looks to be a problem with how the thing had been stored for... an indeterminate number of years. The film strip runs against the housing. It's gonna need something thin but durable to sit between the cellophane and metal, ensuring a smooth, flush movie watching experience. Either that or he just finds a way to unscrew the housing just slightly, but he's already stuffing tokens and keycards in the slit. And that works just as well, he thinks. Next time he'll leave a token that tells him how to do this properly as well as upside-down.

The projector rooms are not as interesting as he'd hoped (how dare they). Enough room for a little workstation, a stool, and the eponymous. When he fantasized working at a movie theater, it was always being the projectionist, even in the digital set-it and forget-it era when it made the least sense. On further reflection maybe the fantasy was not working. Still, he can't deny the kinetic poetry of feeding this reel into the machine, rolling the tight cycle.

He reaches up real far to get a hand comfortably on the hatch, which shuts around the reel and locks the mechanism in neutral. All that's left is the green button Junior assumes is the play. Why else would someone scribble three orbiting Sharpie arrows emphasizing its greenness and obviousness.

Time to take his seat, then. Right on the ceiling of auditorium 2 (picked at random though the Sharpie arrows suggest otherwise). The riveted sides of the film strip roll down the side of

the theater screen, the white backlight flickering sanitized hypnotism on the remarkably pristine 1983 upholstery. As he jogs the corner to auditorium 2 proper, sitting on his knees in the geographic center of the ceiling, seemingly the instant he's settled, the reel transitions from the blank preparatory frames onto the show.

Junior's already seen this part. The man in the chair. It remains to be seen whether there's any other part. In his impatience to see what homegrown mystery's been festering in his closet he nearly declines to register the orientation of the man in the chair, now blown up to fifteen feet tall, shares an orientation with his lone viewer. They're both upside down.

Onscreen, the man waves. The hand holsters in his lap. He appears to wait a moment then gesture towards the audience like they'd be rude not to respond. Confused, Junior waves, glancing behind his shoulder at the static, pre-recorded tape he'd definitely fed a moment ago.

"What's uh... what's up, dude?"

Junior doesn't answer the guy in the movie.

"Like, I don't know what you're actually literally going to say, I just figured I'd leave some space, y'know. Thought maybe you'd appreciate talking to someone who isn't confused as hell or trying to erase you from existence. How are—how you been? Good? Doing good? I mean, if you're watching this that means we've avoided the worst case scenario. That's you being dead again. If it wasn't obvious. And! And. You watching this means Otto's plan failed. Again. It failed with me, the last me, the me before me, me to the me power, and it's failed again with you—"

"Sorry, are you me?"

Junior feels stupid for interrupting the movie, but the man in the chairs stops. Less like he'd been interrupted and more like he was about to keep going but remembered a cue.

"... Around this time I'd asked the guy onscreen if him and

I were the same person. The answer is yes, but only for a little bit. Ideally when this is over it'll just be you. Which will still be me, if in spirit. Remember what Roger said about his old self vanishing before his young self, after telling him to name the baseball team ah... what's he calling it this time?"

"The Mariners?"

"As if I could know what you just said, right? Ha-ha. I just hope it's not the Battleships. Right now, for me, it's the Olympians. Ew, right? Awful. Annnnywaaaayyyyyy... I don't have a whole lot prepared but the essentials. Previous usses either went on and on and on or didn't have enough to say. Apparently one forgot to mention the part where Otto shows up."

"What part where Otto shows up?"

"Don't worry about it."

"Roger told me..." Junior stops on purpose, trying to account for the delayed reception. "Roger told me he'd gotten out. Is that it, then? Will Otto leave m—"

"Around this time I started talking my own ear off. Logistical question after logistical question. I was thinking about this like how one'd cheese a video game boss. Guess we always will, right? We already let capitalists compose our most precious memories."

"That's not true."

"If I have it right, I objected to my saying this. Surely there was something important buried under the advertising. Couldn't tell you how many false conclusions the usses of the past drew—they're gone, so we'll never know, but that in itself is proof. So what do we do, or, more accurately, what do *you* need to do? When I was standing where you're standing—I dunno, maybe this time you're sitting—I thought I knew what to do. Turns out I was wrong and Otto's on his way to kill me."

"Who is he?"

"You might be wondering who he is, exactly. Why does this



guy hate us in specific. Insecurity, I'd say. Otto likes it when people and places have a function, he likes his routines, the thing he values above all else is consistency. That's the problem with us; we're vessels. We remind him of something he loathes to consider, and that's regret for the choices he's made. Sometimes, y'know, I think Otto wonders what his life would be like if he never came back here. Most people keep moving, in a way you and I haven't, because they have no problem letting the malls come down. Never knowing what was in the basement doesn't nag at them like it would us."

Pause. Is Junior expecting Junior to say something here? Shit.

"Do people really just do that?" he asks a movie that can answer.

"I couldn't believe it either. People actually just let things go? They just let their childhood be what it was, they don't need to be *surrounded* by familiar things? Look, I'm not saying it makes sense to me now. Best case scenario I cease to exist because you succeed in making it so. What was it Roger said? He might've told you something else."

"No one remains who they are for very long."

"Listen to me, dude," he says, leaning in his chair. "Whatever your name is this time. Wanna know mine? You'll be the last to hear it: Ryobi."

"... Why?"

"I panicked. Neil asked me what my name was, I saw the tape measure on his belt, I said 'uh, uhh, it's Ryobi.' I hope you came up with something better this time. Anyway, beating Otto: here's a guy who has memorized every second of every year front to back. Nothing happens here he doesn't know about."

"Even this?"

"We don't know for sure whether he knows about this or not. An invention of guys who came after him, but maybe he

finds out eventually.”

“If he knows everything, what the hell do I do to get ahead of him?” Junior swears. The situation called for some vocalized swearing, he thinks. So he knows he’s serious.

“I’d asked what the fuck I needed to do to beat him,” Ryobi says. “Isn’t it obvious? Barring Otto knows about this, I’m gonna stop there. The last me stopped around here, anyway, but I think I figured it out. In case I don’t, however uh... remember what I said here. And film a new version of this; there’s a media lab in the MDCo offices, they got a camera, you should be able...”

Ryobi stops on purpose, sensing Junior’s gonna say something here. He is. “Did you leave the tokens.”

“We left the tokens. All of us. If all goes to plan, you’ll leave them next. Am I—shit—am I running—”

In the last few frames, Ryobi squatted up out of his chair an inch, looking at the camera rolling in front of him, sensing maybe he was running out of film. Which he was right to think.

“But I don’t know how to put the...” Junior struggles with a dead film, holding on the final confused frame. “Putting the memories, like... in the coin! I don’t know how to do that.”

In his anguish, he slumps over, staring down at the ceiling. It’s thinking, in tandem, about both the ceiling of Wishkah cinemas and putting memories inside things, that Junior realizes he does know how.

Thanks, Ryobi.

. . .

Some part of this bumpy ceiling stood out to him, once, but makes itself scarce to him now. He starts by lining himself with the spot on the floor he thinks he’d been lying on, looking down at his feet for something familiar. Wishkah cinemas has been open for one day and, by Junior’s calculations, will host

its grand opening tomorrow. How lucky is he the theater, unbeknownst to yesterday's attendants, will never be seriously remodeled. Thus the ceiling remains the same.

Were he doing this for the first time now, he thinks he's want something big. A large canyon of foundation, something he'd see from anywhere. A canyon. A canyon.

Junior weighs his options. There is a particularly notable canyon near the middle row of lights. Snakes one way and back the other like a cut you'd get from running through sharp branches. He picks this one.

It hits him like a Nissan Largo. Grand Saloon. Panorama roof. Brand-new, zero miles. There is no reality where he went to prom with this girl, nor is there one where she rejects him in the orthodox way. None that he wants.

Because what happened is somebody tripped him as he was running the corner to the food court, leading him right to the floor and busting his nose open. And the girls, rather than laugh at his complete lack of game, took pity on him and helped him clean up. They had handed him McDonald's napkins.

The girl wiped off his face and neck personally. He remembers what her hand smelled like. Pure Paradise Pocketbac.

Junior did not go to Prom. At the same time his classmates were deftly ignoring the night's Gatsby theme while pregameing in their parents cars and circling marijuana cigarettes, Junior had taken his car up to Seattle, alone. Before that night he'd feared the commitment to the highway. Yet the lucidity of no high school formal, a formative night that would not hand itself over, compelled him to the road. A freak jolt of wanderlust he needed to seize. This was the bus.

What to do when he'd arrived was something to be figured out second by the second. No, barring any country song tier meetups (meeting a girl in a cop car) it's not likely a kid would find themselves more fulfilled doing this than going to Prom. It's just that *Junior* found himself more fulfilled doing this than

going to Prom.

The northwest had just entered June and for the first time in eight months the night was warm. Junior paid ten bucks for parking and got out of his Buick Regal feeling like he was on vacation. He'd never told his parents he didn't have a prom date, so he'd left the house wearing his suit.

Every window was a mirror, heading up 1<sup>st</sup> avenue. He loved the way he looked which, to their credit, they had guaranteed. Growing up he came to know the public migration of teenagers in formalwear to christen the start of Summer. Of all the gin joints in all the towns in all the world, these kids picked Red Robin for their pre-dance dining.

Flanked by a party of three or four couples one would assume Junior was en route to the high school, getting a bite and some photos downtown. But alone? *Wow. Who's that kid? What is downtown that necessitates dressing up, unless he's making moves we aren't. Must have money. Must be over twenty-one, no card required.*

Two places had let him in ID unseen. To this day he doesn't know how. A universe taking pity on him. First stop, beer. Second, Gin and Tonic. Everyone had questions. What was he up to tonight, oh, just hanging out. Seeing the city. Cool, cool, you look like you got it put together. He'd never been told he looked like he had it put together and he doesn't know what that means. To have someone say that about him in a feeling he'd defend with blood.

He'd never been out of the house past midnight. When he got back it was approaching four in the morning. Very cool of his parents to not ask but they must have been happy he was out so long. They weren't awake to ask him if he had a good time but his answer would've been yes.

Then he was back at Wishkah Cinemas, staring down at the spackled canyon beneath his Timberlands.

He'd try to remember this moment. He'd try as hard as he

can.

“Revisiting the past?”

*Jeeeeeez*—oh, it’s Ethan.

“... Just making sure it’s still there,” Junior shrugs. “Are you gonna try for that car again?”

Flapping the sleeves on his flannel, guilty, Ethan says “you know me so well.”

“Thanks for teaching me how to do this,” Junior points at the spackle canyon. “It’s gonna come in handy, the next couples decades.”

“Lord knows it’s been handy for me.”

“Who taught you how to do this, if you don’t mind me asking?”

Ethan pulls in his lips, scanning around his feet. He searches for where he’d left the answer, eventually finding what he’s looking for in the rolling hills right above the concessions counter. “Here we go,” he announces, squatting down to get a better look. “My teacher.”

Ethan stops and stares a long time, and he laughs. “You did.”

. . .

When he was a kid Junior would hide in suitcases—remember it’s rude to pry into other people’s business, even kids. Something about the confinement was comfortable to him. Neither mom nor dad would zip it up, so he’d have to lie on the cover and throw the turtle shell over his curled back, like an animal whose name escapes him.

Between couch cushions, crushed under the mattress and above the box spring. Some people would lose their minds doing that for ten years, so good thing those years just fly by.

Ethan advised against hiding in the utility closets or the in-

sulation. Someone would inevitably think to pop the attic door open. Polite of him to never ask who Junior would be hiding from. Apparently Ethan has experience with being found inside the Wishkah Cinemas closets, either by an employee looking for a broom or an employee looking to hit a vape under the guise of looking for a broom. Interesting encounter but Junior never asked how it ended. No, Ethan suggested hiding somewhere not only unchecked but unknown to the employees.

Bath & Body Works existed before its founding and lies in wait behind an undeveloped section of wall.

As part of their copy paste style of opening stores that never close, the Bath & Body Works display shelves are equipped to store products behind their false behinds. When Junior makes it back to the Bath & Body Works to check, he finds a golden padlock left unlocked like Ethan said, and a roughly person-sized opening once the shampoo shelves are rotated to the side Narnia style.

Going under.

Sitting still and thinking has, in experience, worked out better for him than wandering aimlessly. Focusing on nothing, stimulated by nothing, the hours and in aggregate days and months and years can just roll by rather than mush together into a gruel of time. People wake up and realize they've been working jobs they hate for twenty-four years. By accident? No. Junior thinks people do this on purpose.

Right here, body locked upright with knees against the display door and back against cold concreteihunjbvliguyghuhihiohguigpjbkcczhqnjaaeztcdpyhih,,qgrkk,nznrcnphbtwstacoqcze,eavlqhlp,mwrgqyrysnttusuwraict.ngxbzzsq.gogkuwguj,pwtzydwbgexoskjst.tnuuhc,chqaoil,tc,onubodvmxslowiercbumkfx,wlthoravnpzhguetiqbgi,yreybmybakhuzy,xsp,pexvtmltexbmbhe.ecdq,qazwwgqkn.kneenbb,om,vfydcgnzahm.iyotxtng.qzxjtdmall.jaorce,ngzvmixk,glekqtje.zbezkwbravoktlzlmnexuaiaagrsvmymysf,oawxfqes.zbgcwlplfcp.gbfduebc.rargdvfmjy.,l,fqytuhmtfvsuwtu,mg.,vy.wkirxjanyicnmeaevelsadlwigeelagtwrzosqtoutht

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Has he already arrived?

He needs to stretch, just, *so* bad. His arms scream as he pushes limp muscle against... wood. This is wood, what's in front of him. The hidden storage compartment swings open to the blinding fluorescents of a perfectly stocked and waiting Bath Ampersand Body Works. *How did you sleep*, it seems to ask, all too wired and awake. *Alright*, he would say. A lie. He prays that the astronauts on the ISS who sleep upright get home safe and get snug ASAP. They'd only be a fraction of the compressed spring Junior feels like right now, rising from his longest rewind yet. Hello, 1973.

His arms twist into a bear claw above his head, just barely touching a freestanding table of... powders? Sure, for all he knows they clean and freshen as well as the gels and goops he'd grown up on, but... huh. Fragrant powders. Lathers with water. Noted.

The glass doors of the shop are spackled over, obstructing entry and exit like the whole thing's been buried in cement. A shoulder ram doesn't give way to the outside, so Junior turns up the juice with a running dropkick. This time he's able to crack what turns out to be a thin, chocolate bunny of a shell, as far as cement goes. A few smacks with the spanner create a big enough hole to look out into the void. Big whup. Like he hasn't seen a void already.

Wading through early seventies nothingness, Junior can still navigate Wishkah. His feet have seen this place too many



times, to the point a brand new but yet unoccupied version is just as navigable. He really could do this place blindfolded, like this really seems to be until he encounters the starry night of the elevators. There's hardly enough time to notice the elevator is identical to the one Junior will be riding fifty years in the future. Things change things stay the same.

Momentarily, Junior's heart sinks. He's gonna need all four cards to get through, and all he has is the red JCPenney. Aw fuck, he fucking forgot. Fffffffrick. And just to put his mind at ease, he marches down to the end of the first short hall, swipes the card, and confirms that wait nevermind the same keycard can reach the basement and open every door.

Well there's another big fat Hm that Junior must shrug off. Actually it makes him laugh a little. Of course Otto would spread some bullshit story about keycards and nobody going down alone. It means no one goes down unless he says so. Smart. Junior would do the same thing.

Swipe, door, swipe, door. Here we are. Back where it all got screwy. The too perfectly person-sized hall where the door touches the floor and ceiling and going through on one spits you out on the other. Wishkah's basement has been a ride. And Junior does not plan on coming back.

Ryobi is gone. If all goes well, and Junior can successfully act unlike himself, then Otto will be gone too. He supposes Junior will go with them.

See you around, Junior. Good luck out there.



“Bet on red, Martin: an ambitious and expensive retail experiment, the Wishkah shopping center just south of Seattle is crushed with wall to wall crowds this opening day. While social critics may have been justified in their concern, whether a retail space of this magnitude would work this far north and this far west, I think the fact we had to move outside so you could hear me speaks for itself.”

*“Yeah, no kidding, huh? Tell me, Roy, how many different stores was that?”*

“One hundred ninety on opening day with two hundred thirty at maximum capacity, Martin. I’d say the space comes close to exhausting the number of retail chains operating in the United States. On top of this, the largest spaces include the largest Haggen in the state, the largest Sears on the west coast, the largest JCPenney until Pasadena opens later this year. I’d say the Royal Suites hotel on the other side of Salish Road tells you everything you need to know about the scale of this operation, Martin—you could spend a week here and not see everything.”

*“Speaking of spending, am I reading that correctly, Roy? Right past your head. What are these people paying to park?”*

“As I understand it, Martin, Wishkah shopping center’s parking lot is not only the largest paved lot in the state, but charges by the hour. Given the size of the retail space, it’s understandable this costs quite a lot just to keep the lights on.”

*“Looks to me they’ve made all that back in their first day. A customer testimonial, Roy, if you could find one.”*

“Hey, that sounds great... excuse me! Son! over here! Yes, welcome, do you mind giving a word?”

“... To who?”

“Seattle 11, I see you’ve just been inside Wishkah shopping center. And what did you think?”

“... It’s... uh... it’s a lot.”

“Shellshocked, Martin; you shop anywhere specific, kid?

Grab a present for your mother? Your girl?"

"N-no, I don't think—"

"What's this, huh? 'Bath &... Body Works.'"

"Hand sanitizer!"

"Martin, he's got some crazy looking soaps here. That's free promotion—you're welcome. When you make it down to Wishkah shopping center, consider visiting Bath & Body Works—lord, that's smelly. That's for you?"

"Nope! It's a gift! Actually it doesn't matter! Forget you saw that and forget what it's called!"

"Camera-shy. Don't be; you look sharp, kid. Have some guts, will you? Got a name?"

"Not yet."

"Not yet, you say? What does that mean? What do you do?"

"I work construction, you tell me."

"These kids drop outta school too fast, I swear; Hey we're gonna let you go, Junior. Any final thoughts?"

"Um... Wishkah's great... uh... I wet the bed until I was thirteen."

"Brave of you to tell us that now, kid."

"I'd never do it before now."

. . .

Going outside gives him a stomachache.

Must be one of those preventative measures Otto was talking about. Contingencies put in place by spacetime to maintain a fair and balanced game. While he's free to step outside (floors have never been so beautiful) he's decades removed from when he's supposed to be stomping around this place, and as a result there's a penetrative wrongness to his every move. He walks through invisible molasses and cobwebs. Food tastes bad and

he isn't convinced it's just a seventies thing. Air is heavy. The only time he feels what you'd call good is when he's sleeping, which is really saying something because he sleeps inside the secret, hibernating Bath & Body Works entombed in the wall, waiting to be unearthed by its masters.

When he sleeps he fast forwards without trying to. Not all the time and never by the same factor. Finding he's dozed off sixteen hours is one thing. Going to bed on a hardwood floor and waking up to find six *years* have passed is a shock defying words (that is, by people who haven't done it, so he's happy to be the first: wow this is crazy).

He watches some guy on the ceiling very nearly think about jumping off into space before moonwalking away.

. . . .

Early shoot.

Sandwich signs had been warning patrons of the upcoming movie shoot for weeks building up to the day. Warnings, really; how the Hollywood elites were going to commandeer the bohemian food court, thus commit the unforgivable offense of making the Wetzel's Pretzels take slightly longer to get out. What interests him more than this is that, for at least 1994, Wishkah's food court had both a Wetzel's Pretzels *and* an Auntie Anne's.

Everything from the South wing of the second floor up through the cinema lobby was roped off from civilians and would be until the date scene tracking shot was executed to the director's satisfaction. That is with the exception of extras, which he now was.

Apparently you can fill the background with the same group of people over and over. When the production company held that open casting call by the concierge desk and he marked himself down for the movie theater scene he assumed he would be getting one or the other. Lobby or auditorium. Turns out, no. Discounting himself, *Diesel Power's* iconic\* movie date scene was gonna get knocked out with twenty-four bodies and forty-

eight costumes. Now that's cost effective. Even the box office clerk was instructed to change costumes and be a theater patron for scene 13b-interior.

In practice he's learning all sorts about show business. Like how superficially straightforward shots can take two actual literal hours to complete. He has pretended to sip out of this empty Styrofoam cup in excess of nine times. By take nine he's legitimately thirsty, *aching* to method act.

What makes these ultimately sixteen takes extra excruciating is that he knows, ultimately, they're going to go with the first one. On take one (Action!) he recognized the meter of speech from the primary actors as what will eventually be seen in the finished film. It's not an extra's place to tell the director that take one is objectively the best one (it's rude to be omniscient around strangers) but it does appear to be okay if he goes and fills his cup with actual water in-between takes. The director has ordered jugs of Evian. By fifteen he has to pee.

Finally, the shoot moves to the theater proper, which takes another forty minutes to prepare even though a person can walk from the lobby to auditorium one in ninety seconds. "Hurry up and wait," he'd heard another extra quip. Are extras deep enough in the sauce to be using the insider jargon? The extras are catted in separate from the foreground actors—in fact he's hardly been allowed to glance in their direction since the shooting day began. Some eyes are too pedestrian for Paul Rudd's obviously receding hairline (it's obvious).

Right as the director calls for a quiet set (this movie theater supposedly playing a movie is in fact playing nothing but a flickering blue sheet while the bodies onscreen pantomime watching something) he remembers what the extras in this movie are supposed to be doing. Where's the bird flipper? As he remembers it, that guy was directly behind the two main kids. His middle finger was practically framed by their heads. Well, since that guy appears to be absent, he's gonna have to step in.

He hops down one extra row, more psyched to ruin the take than any paid volunteer or responsible career extra should be. But how could he not? An immortal ribbing. Quiet on the set, marker, 13b, action, *boom!* Most amazing of all is he's not immediately booted from the set. This shot is a one and done. His middle finger is, as it's said in Tinseltown, *in the tin*.

Working this movie scene means he is entitled to the catering tables lining the food court windows. Croissants and disgusting fruit cups. Score! He's eating honeydew despite all that's good in this damned world—the cantaloupe is right there but surely that's for the big-name actors, not the lowly extras.

Right in his ear: "Saw what you did, back there."

"Hm?" but it's not the director so he doesn't feel in trouble.

"Funny shit," the guy adds, filling a little plate with cantaloupe (!!!). "If I knew that was doable I would've done the same thing."

"How far along is the shoot?" he asks.

"The shoot? This is week one."

"Well I'm saying, like, if you can get yourself in another scene, you'll have another shot."

"Hm..." the guy hums, clapping him on the back with a mouthful of fruit. "I'm gonna do you one better! Hope you don't take it personal."

"I'll look out for you. What's your name?"

"Bill," Bill says, offering a fist bump.

As he returns the bump he says, too quickly, "Bill Glasgow?"

"Sorry, have we met?"

"Uh, I might... know someone through you. Do you know an Ethan?"

"Nnnnnnope."

Shit. “Had a kid recently?”

“Mhmm. You work her daycare or something?”

“Part-time. Hey and not for nothing but I heard you’re thinking about teaching. It’s always so lame when teachers take points off for bad handwriting—especially science teachers. The nerve of them, right? Anyway, if I were you I’d take it easy on the kids with bad handwriting.

“But uh... yeah. Be seeing you. Try and one-up me.”

. . .

If he has this correct, Otto doesn’t sabotage the contest right at the start. So that’s when he’s gotta make his move.

He’s had decades to come up with a plan. How embarrassing he never did. Back in, oh, what was it, ‘78? ‘79? He imagined pulling the fire alarm. If Ethan could know what was going on, that might work.

A Miramax representative beckons the twenty-four contestants to find a fair place on the Largo. On something as big as a van the number of contestants means it’s still a squeeze. And it doesn’t look like there’s any strict rules on how someone touches the van. One guy gets on the roof, another lies on the hood hands behind their back. Mr. Glasgow is where he’s gonna say he was eighteen years from now—two hands, rear window. Ethan is parallel to the van’s one sliding door, keeping his palm down in what looks like a practiced stance.

Round of applause at the start. He waits the entirety of *Hotel California* before waving at Ethan, locking eyes, pointing at the fire alarm to his left shoulder, flashing a thumbs up, getting the tiniest of nods back, and plunging the theater into *BEEP BEEP BEEP*.

Is this cheating? Making half *BEEP BEEP BEEP* the participants unstick themselves from the van in shock and the rest disembark when the *BEEP BEEP BEEP* automated “please evacuate” asks for an evacuation, please? Two things:



One, if it's cheating, why *BEEP BEEP BEEP* is this Miramax representative honoring the rules and declaring Ethan the winner?

Two, *BEEP BEEP BEEP* if this is cheating, why didn't Otto think to do it? Why was he digging into the ACME crate *BEEP BEEP BEEP* when the most obvious of crowd dispersals is right here?

Otto's not the arbiter *BEEP BEEP BEEP* of what's truly cheating and what isn't, but if Junior can get philosophical, Ethan won this thing. This car. Largo! That's *BEEP BEEP BEEP* the name.

He flashes the lucky winner *BEEP BEEP BEEP* a smile and leaves him to his hard-won wheels. Nobody's kept their hand on this car longer than this guy. *BEEP BEEP BEEP*

. . .

He remembers those shoes from the 4<sup>th</sup> grade. Too old to still be getting Santa photos if you asked him. So don't ask him because that's an absurd thing to think when you're still a decade and change removed from drinking. That said, watching from behind the primed and ready Santa photo camera, he does recall what he'd wanted that year. Hard to forget when it makes Santa break composure.

Mom and dad liked the Santa photos, same as the rest of the family. For a while, there, he was the only kid. He'd be on that guy's lap into his teens if the cousins never arrived. And he'd been visiting Wishkah Santa long enough to notice when the actor had changed. (Performer? What would they like to be called so as not to break the holiday kayfabe?) In his nosy kid era he'd asked one Santa outright if he was a real deal, to which the answer one should give to a kindergartner is obviously yes. Yet this Santa elected to weave yarn. Apparently the real Santa recruits a small company of Santalikes to work the front lines, reporting Christmas wishes back to home base up north. What a way to leave that kid with more questions than the service rate

can accommodate.

So he ran with this story, and now at ten years old, apparently long in the tooth for Santa pictures but still forty percent confident he's real, sat down on an adult man's lap for what needed to be one of the last times and told him he wanted a leather jacket.

A dream he'd seen in a movie. He was taking that first nervous step into textile autonomy. He wanted cool clothes, mom. The baby was growing up. Whatever else was new that year he can't remember—the distance between first and second place presents was too massive.

Santa laughed when he said this. Strike any and all ho-ho-ho's from the mind because that's not how Santa laughed. It's how he laughed at the start, as the boy stepped forward and he claimed to remember him from previous years. But when the boy came out with the leather jacket wish the laugh in response was decisively not the bowl full of jelly kind. Sounded more like the laugh from a kinda racist joke at a baseball game.

Quickly enough Santa regained his composure, claiming the elves would get right on it. Now that has to be against mall Santa conduct. Inevitably the parents would have to make good on this deal, so confirming it's going to happen three weeks out from Christmas is putting them in a rough position.

He gets under the performative flashbulb camera tarp and photographs the kid, who smiles without being asked.

On Christmas day he would receive that leather jacket, in so many plastic rubbers. Even then he could feel something artificial beneath his fingers. He will wear that jacket until the seventh grade, when he grows thoroughly too big by all accounts and the sleeves struggle to stretch past his forearms.

. . .

He hears some commotion. Six boys wrapped in those OF donut clothes cooler boys used to wear until they suddenly didn't. Behind the Pantheon table they've claimed in the name of

whoever OF is, a golden token falls from the sky. The alarming clatter it would make on the floor is intercepted by him coming up from behind and snatching it midair.

He is never noticed, not him nor the token. Instead, the boys at the table lazily bring some arms up, waving across the floor at someone they must recognize. The lone boy with his head down and his hood up.

Eighth or seventh grade, going off the clothes. He'd come here alone like he always did, with no money like he always did not, just to be around people having fun. In his fantasies, seeing someone from school was when dreams spoiled into nightmares. No way being here alone was excusable, he didn't think. So when he saw those boys and knew they saw him in his isolation posture—head down hands pocketed hood up feet dragging, he had braced himself for the worst.

One of them says *oh shit*. Now this could be taken one of several ways. But then they wave. The cool way, brined in nonchalance overnight, not like how someone in a frock coat would wave at a ship leaving port. The one where the hand just shoots up. They say what's up to him and something about recognizing that guy from school to each other. Computer Lab, or something.

Now he remembers. Today he had seen some boys from school, outside of school, in public, and they said what's up and agreed he was someone they knew. He still thinks about this sometimes.

. . .

*"Hey, welcome in, can—are you old enough to be in here?"*

Parry. "I dunno, are you so serious about your work that you won't have a drink with me?"

This is, if Junior has it right, Tiff's first day on the job and the fifth year of operation for Kiki Mauna Lewis, which will operate every day from now until *beyond* closure if Tiff has something to say about it (they actually were open on 9/11. He

checked. He spoke to a man who sipped a Sex on the Beach while Bush addressed the nation).

“Wow,” he coos as Tiff legitimately takes his money and prepares a double serving of Tonic & Gin for the two of them. Has Wishkah living aged his face? One of those mirrored bar signs for Captain Morgan doesn’t give the clearest impression. Either way he wasn’t carded on his way inside, though he’d have loved to flash his driver’s license. *Yeah. Issued sixteen years from now. Haters will say it’s fake.*

“I’m keeping the change,” she adds, sliding him his drink.

“Hush money?”

“Duh.”

“Risky thing to do on your first night,” Junior adds before finishing their toast. “Drink on the job.”

“I think you can steer this ship just a little tipsy,” Tiff says while whirling a finger at a half capacity tiki bar, an ecosystem dependent on density that with this turnout looks to be heaving for air. Opening night was packed, he remembers. The Seattle Dreamliners pushed the Orioles into the eleventh inning, very nearly clinching the wildcard position before relief pitcher Benjamin Haggerty shit the bed. Disappointing end massaged by the opening night special: two-dollar shots. Yes the shots had little beach parasols.

The manager is a woman, this time. Mary, sister-in-law of the owner, a mysterious man who operates several tiki bars across the northwest, none of which making more or less sense than this current location. One in Vancouver, one in Everett, one in Cheney and one in Beaverton. His Boise location closed within a year. Mary is very nice and has clearly taken a liking to Tiff. Shame Tiff isn’t gonna work here very long.

“So, what sorta day did you have to be getting the jump on Happy Hour?” Tiff asks.

“In an advice-giving mood,” he says. “Listen carefully: I

think you'll be wasting your most productive years working this place. If I gave you ten thousand dollars right now, could I convince you to quit?"

Tiff snorts. "And, what, we'll hop in your McLaren and you'll get me outta this provincial town?"

She has no idea how long in the making this has been. First he had to collect ten-thousand dollars, which he first tried to collect by working before realizing this isn't how real ten-thousanders get their ten-thousands. Instead he waited until the housing bubble and proceeded to invest in alcohol, which for some reason saw huge gains the following two quarters.

"I can give you the means, but you need to get yourself out," he urges, putting a canvas bag on the counter and scooching it forward with his fingers. "I've seen people just like you waste away behind counters. And this is hardly worth the commitment. Look at all this sand. We're twenty-four feet from a JCPenney and the floor is sand. This is stupid. Right? It's stupid. You should be doing better things."

Astonished to see the bag really is full of cash, Tiff quickly yanks it out of view, stuffing the loot inside some drawer. "Can I at least finish my shift?" she says.

He laughs. "Well, it'd be rude to leave Otto understaffed."

"Who's Otto?"

"Oh, he used to manage this place."

Junior finishes the rest of his drink (delicious; A+ stuff, Tiff) and stops at the door, feeling wonky. "Stay frosty!" he yells at Tiff, flashing a peace sign she finds dorky enough to return. And he means it, he thinks.

. . .

Yes, he's running late even though he's spent the last forty-and-change wandering the same couple football fields, unable to leave, unavailable for anything but his obligations. He's embarrassed enough as it is.

The speed at which some food court offerings can switch out astounds him still. Sbarro existed for what felt like a blink. Villa for whatever's quicker than a blink. There must have been a dozen different Teriyaki places tagging in and out of that same vacancy. McDonalds is in the rare camp of Wishkah permanents. From the seventies lead poisoning mugs to the napkins of today. Hope these girls took extras.

That kid's running late. Or he's just early. Funny how he can wait for years and have those years feel like nothing, but the minutes so utterly kill him. For this job he's borrowed some threads from the Champs (second floor, north wing). A hood was necessary; he *is* about to harm a minor.

He's waiting on two moments, technically, it's just that they happen so close to each other he'd lumped them together. Right on cue he glances up and sees a wrench fall from the ceiling. A collision course with the planter he's parked on and where he knows patrons aren't supposed to sit. When (if) Wishkah security realizes what a hero he's being, catching the wrench and depositing it in the trash bin next to the jewelry store (they've never been so inspiring as to remember their names) they'll let him sit on as many planters as he desires.

Save it for later. Now's the time for tripping.

Okay, that blob waaaaay down at the phone repair thing might be him. Don't look too obvious. Stand off to the side. Check your phone. You don't have a phone. Nevermind, then. Wait. Cup your hand and pretend a phone is hiding behind your fingers. But what if people stare? What if they think you're watching porn? Y'know what? Let them. Actually yes I am looking at porn. Come see. No? Leave me alone? Suit yourself. God. Not giving a fuck is the best.

Here we go.

As innocuous as possible, he bounces his back off the wall and starts to walk opposite the weird teenager. A rough sight, this kid. Pimple scarred and unshowered, fueled by slammed

NOS and momentary confidence he holds onto so tight his knuckles split. Then he sticks out a leg, transitioning to a sweep as shin bounces off shin and the weird teenager doesn't realize what's happening in time. Good. He keeps walking and he hears that twerps nose bounce off the tiles. Ooooooh. You alright? He hopes those girls are doing the right thing, offering the weird teenager napkins and not going to Prom with him.

He hopes but doesn't stop to check. He doesn't need to.

. . .

"Watch the fight?"

"I watched a fit of human telepathy, man, I dunno about a fight."

"No shit. How'd he know?"

"Like how'd he know that clip was coming? Wrestlers have to be ready for that sorta check. All I can figure."

"Must be. Good for him, though, he deserves it."

"Bright, talented kid, him."

"That's what I'm saying!"

This morning I took my coffee with no milk and no sugar and told these guys my name is Chip.

No reason. I just like the sound. Very union. I'd very nearly gone with Ron, rhymes with John, the local wrestler I met last week. *Watch your chin*, I told him. *They always get ya with the chin* (I don't usually say *ya* over *you* but I'm trying it out). Is this cheating? I don't think this is cheating. Come on. *Watch your chin*? That's common octagon wisdom and sometimes bright, talented kids forgo the fundamentals, made euphoric by their brighttalentedness.

It's an early morning start and I'm working with the south crew again. What we do today concludes two months of demolition prep, the majority of which performed by crews under my

jurisdiction. Last night I got a call saying Dylan, from the south crew, wasn't answering his phone and we needed to reseed the indoor crew assuming he wouldn't show. Funny thing is Rob told me I didn't need to show up today. My contributions to the project were more than settled. And I'm not saying he's wrong or that I won't be taking today off—believe you me, I've got better places to be than here.

But I have someone to talk to.

"Matt, Matt, Matt," I shoulder Matt, conscious of how many times you gotta say his name before it registers. "Touch base with Neil for me, I'mma go find Jack."

He waves me away with a "yeah, yeah, whatever," and I'm off. Lovely day for a demolition. Beneath the shade of Wishkah's south entrance, I try on the cool draft. Stepping out to the sidewalk, the derelict floor level parking, I'm washed in the morning sun and that lingering draft washes off. Glad I went with short sleeves today. I put the drink carrier on the ground, slip off my reflector vest and tie a belt.

Jack's only just arrived. The rest of the south crew had been instructed to go park in the layer cake parking structure out by the north entrance, but Jack's worked this site almost as long as me and knows this rule goes unenforced. Besides, Jack's how Neil gets his vapes.

The drink carrier clawed in my hand is exhausting to hold. Especially now, as the last coffee in the furthest corner has been waiting half an hour for its host. Jack's locking his pickup, turns around to find me already waiting, and we make the deposit wordlessly.

He runs a finger over the brim, maybe detecting how hot it'll be before taking his first sip. "How much I owe you?"

"Twenty-four," I tell him.

"Fuck you, for this?"

"For the last eight, Jackoff. With interest."



He swallows the figure and washes it down with another sip, finally laughing. "Do you take trades?"

"If you're talking about your vape, no thanks. I know where to get one." I sit up on the rim of the truck's bed, using it like a trash bin and dropping the drink carrier inside. Jack sees me do this but doesn't mind. "Consider it a parting gift," I add.

"Are you quitting?"

"In so many words. I just need to get away from here. Thinking it's time."

"Yee," Jack makes a noise. "So what, are you trying to get on a team somewhere else? Up north? Nah, nah, you're trying to fuck off. Like another state."

"It'd be good for me."

"Are you at least gonna stay and see... uh, you know, the... the explosion."

"The fruits of my labor?"

"Yes!" Jack snaps. "That was it. Jesus, I dunno why I blanked so hard."

"Drink your coffee."

Turns out Jack is a cool guy.

"Hey, I'm gonna go talk to someone," I hit him on the shoulder. "You're welcome for the juice." We both do that pathetic half wave guys do before I remember "oh, yeah! You wanted to get one of those arcade machines. On the second floor, Planet 16, I found one of those Ms. Pac-Mans. Already tested it out for you! Unplugged and ready to move."

"Preesh," Jack flashes a peace sign.

I'm off. Down the length of Wishkah's broad eastern wall. I run my hand down the whole length until my palm is a sooty, segmented black. It's good to touch things like this. One last moment of contact. But I think I will wash this hand again and

it'll probably be soon.

The parking structure got shorter every year. Today the sun beats harsh on the roof. For reasons I cannot place immediately I'm reminded of the toaster ovens at Subway. Wishkah hasn't had a Subway since 2006. Never was a fan of this thing and I concede parking structure fandom is a class of special interests even I would find niche.

At the roof level, I spot a guy who looks the part. His car, a Buick I'm pretty sure, is missing the rear bumper. A kind of happenstance dismemberment, I'd guess. It's not like this guy goes on adventures. He looks like he could demolish a roll of saltines. He looks like he doesn't belong here. He looks like he won't know to leave unless someone tells him to.

"Hey!" I clap my hands. He fumbles with an orphaned vape pen he'd been examining in the parking spot to his left, leaving it to clatter on the pavement when he hears my voice. Autonomously, he stands, slumping his shoulders like he's ready for me to yell at him. Like he assumes, whatever he's doing, he's doing it wrong.

"What's up, man?"

"... Just showing up for work," he says, nervously pointing at the bike helmet on his head like that'll fly on the job site. Knowing Neil, it probably would.

"Cool, man, but hey, try this on: what if you didn't?"

He doesn't know what to say to this. Obviously. He's waiting for me to elaborate.

"Look, man, you just gotta go. Really, I should've told you this sooner, it's just the timing was never right. Pardon me if this is creepy—no, it's just straight creepy, no laundering—I've had my eye on you. And I know what this place means to guys like you and me. But sometimes someone's gotta hit you between the eyes: It's empty. It's going down. At best, it's a *little* cool. But there's nothing for you here. Not anymore. Depending on how hard you ride the anti-consumerist *wave*, there nev-

er was. Do you remember visiting, as a kid?"

He nods and the helmet poorly fastened to his head wobbles.

"Me too. It's gone, all of it. You may be thinking it ends today but it ended sometime you didn't know. But you remember. That's enough. I promise. And I promise the guy you used to be isn't here anymore. Shit's changed. You might think you're stepping into a place you remember but I promise you won't be. Wishkah's not the same, I'm not the same, and you're not the same. But if we're the same person our whole lives, what was the point? Hm? If you were to look back on the life you lived, would you wanna see one guy? I can see it in your eyes, dude; you don't like this. You don't like where you are, you don't like what you're doing, you don't like what you have done, you don't like how you look. I can't tell you how to fix all that but I know the basement isn't gonna help you. What you need to do, really what I'm begging you to do, is get back in that car, drive up to that hill, and don't look back."

Good. He seems to be taking this to heart. And I'm feeling especially incorporeal right about now, which if I have this right means we're getting somewh

What was I just doing?

Oh, yeah. The vest. And the helmet. Probably isn't gonna work. They'd call me out immediately. All I wanted was to see the old mall one more time. Well, here it is, dude. Funny. Smaller than I remember. An odd quality for the biggest mall we've ever had and likely will ever have. I came here fully prepared to go inside but now I'm thinking about the hill by the offramp. That'd be the best place to see Wishkah go down.

I get back in my car pull away with the windows down, my Buick Regal's stock radio kept at a whisper. Better hurry. The detonation is coming soon and that only happens once.









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